

SPADONES ET CASTRATI: TWO TYPES OF EUNUCHS IN ROMAN LITERATURE
AND LAW

By

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To My Parents, *namque vos solebatis meas nugas esse aliquid putare*

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A eunuch is generally defined as a castrated man. The word itself gives us no clue as to the method or purpose of castration. In many cases, such distinctions are unnecessary or superfluous. At times however, they are vital. Latin is much more complex in this instance. There are a number of Latin words that can be translated into English as “eunuch.” This paper attempts to further define and examine two of those terms in particular: *spado* and *castratus*.

In order to accomplish this task, all occurrences of *spado* and *castratus* in Roman literature from about the 1st century B.C.E. to the 2nd century C.E. were collected and examined individually, and also according to genre. An exception was made in the case of the legal texts gathered in the 6th century *Digest* of Justinian. Prose, poetry, and law all come together to show us the manner and circumstances in which these two terms were used. Just as importantly, the context provides tantalizing clues to how eunuchs were perceived by the Romans themselves. Finally, such a word study seeks to bring

further attention to an obscure and oft-neglected subject, thereby contributing to the study of eunuchs in antiquity as a whole.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The study of eunuchs has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves. The majority of new research in the Greco-Roman region focuses primarily upon the late Roman Empire and Byzantine periods. The idea for this paper arose from such a context. It all started with the difficulty of drawing a clear distinction between the terms *spado* and *castratus* in a graduate seminar on Roman law. Justinian's *Institutes* obviously made some distinction between these two terms, but modern dictionaries were not at all helpful. So began the journey to find an adequate definition.

It is the hope of the author, however, that this paper will provide the reader with more than mere definitions. This is primarily a word study of the Latin terms *spado* and *castratus*, but in looking at these words, one also hopes to discover the role that eunuchs played in Roman society, as well as the reactions and attitudes of the people around them. Obviously the use of only two terms, from one language (Latin), within a limited period of time (2nd c. B.C.E. – 2nd c. C.E.) prevents this study from being comprehensive in any way, shape or form. It will however shed light on a subject that is still largely undeveloped and often misunderstood.

Terminology

The basic premise of this paper is to fully define and “flesh-out” the terms *spado* and *castratus*, looking specifically at Roman literature in the classical period. Before we can do this, a basic understanding of the terminology associated with the topic of eunuchs

is necessary. I am referring specifically to the relevant ancient Greek and Latin words which we now translate as “eunuch.”

The Greeks had several words they used to describe a castrated man.¹ The first that comes to mind is of course ευνουχος, which becomes the Latin *eunuchus* and the English “eunuch.” The word is derived from the role that eunuchs often played: chamberlains, or bedchamber attendants (οι την ευνην εχοντες). εκτομιας and θλαδιας also translate as eunuch. The former is derived from the verb εκτεμνω (to cut or castrate), and the latter from θλω (to crush or bruise). Most importantly for our purposes, there was the term σπαδων. Liddell and Scott tell us that this word comes from the verb σπαω, meaning to draw (a sword), snatch or tear. σπαδων is translated simply as “eunuch” in the *LSJ*. The *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* defines σπαδων thus: *Cui testiculi evulsi sunt, nervus genitale membrum erigens, convulsus est, nervi kremasthreV, ex quibus testiculi suspensi sunt, evulsi*, or “one whose testicles have been extracted, or the muscle which raises the penis has been torn, or the muscles (κρεμαστηρες) from which the testicles are suspended have been torn.”

From the Greek, we get the Latin *spado*. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines the term this way: a *spado* is a eunuch, or the term may be applied in general to any impotent male. It may also be used figuratively of plants or their parts. Lewis and Short say too that a *spado* is: one who has no generative power, an impotent person, whether by nature or by castration; hence *spado* is more generic than *castratus*.

¹ Scholz lists seven Greek terms for emasculation: spadon, ektomias, tomias, apokopos, thlibias, thladias, and ithris (2000: 112).

Before we move on to *castratus*, we should look at what ancient authors had to say on the definition of *spado*. Pliny, speaking of the testicles says: *homini tantum iniuria aut sponte naturae franguntur, idque tertium ab hermaphroditis et spadonibus semiviri genus habent*, or “For man only they may be crushed by injury or by natural causes, and this forms a third group, the impotent (*semiviri*), distinct from hermaphrodites and eunuchs (*spadones*) (*HN* 11.263). This seems contrary to the definitions above; but even Williams comments that “[Pliny’s] distinctions do not seem to reflect the ordinary language, which was certainly capable of describing surgically castrated eunuchs as *semiviri*” (1999: 329, n.29). And so *spado* could surely describe a person impotent from injury or natural causes. To add to the confusion, several later authors explicitly equate *spado* with *eunuchus*, which again implies castration rather than accidental or natural impotency.²

The term *castratus* is the perfect passive participle of the verb *castrare* (to castrate), or the substantive use of the adjective meaning “castrated” and thus is used as a term for a eunuch also. The root comes from the Sanskrit for knife, *çastra*. Victor Cheney also speculates on the correlation between *castro* and *castor*, the Latin word for beaver (1995: 4-5). Legend had it that the beaver would castrate itself when in danger (thereby removing its scent gland). Juvenal mentions this in *Satire* 12, lines 34-36: *imitatus castora, qui se/ eunuchum ipse facit cupiens euadere damno/ testiculi: adeo medicatum intellegit inguen.*

² For late definitions of *spado*, see Schol. Hor., *Sat.* 1.1.105, August., *Serm.* 99.11.11, and Isid., *Etym.* 10.93 and 17.5.6.

Just to be clear, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “eunuch” as “a castrated person of the male sex,” and this is what it will represent in this paper.³ Since the primary definition of both *spado* and *castratus* is eunuch, the terms seem to be interchangeable. This paper hopes to show in what circumstances this was true, or not true. I also hope to clarify the definition of *spado*, in hopes of better understanding when and where it represented a castrated individual, as opposed to a naturally impotent one.

A Brief Overview of Eunuchs and Castration

Before we begin our search into the usage of *spado* and *castratus*, some general background information is necessary. In researching this topic, I have found that the average person today often has little or no knowledge of the term eunuch whatsoever (or at most, the term conjures the exotic harems of the middle East). Even among scholars, most know little more than to say that a eunuch is a castrated man. To speak further of such matters is taboo, even today. As a result, it is necessary to acquaint the reader with some basic information regarding castration, and the history of eunuchism throughout the world.

We do not know when castration first appears, but it is fair to say that the practice goes back to the earliest times (i.e., when men began to herd animals). Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that the Assyrian queen Semiramis (810-782 B.C.E.) was the first to castrate young men (14.6.17). Some report that Tarquinius Superbus also used castration

³ Scholz (2000) makes the valid argument that a eunuch does not necessarily have to be a castrato. For convenience however, “eunuch” will refer to a castrated individual (method thereof notwithstanding) in this paper.

as a punishment for rebellious citizens (Scholz 2000: 122), and that he castrated the young sons of exiled noblemen for his sexual pleasure (Cheney 1995: 56).⁴

When the practice of castration began is not as important as why it began, and why it proceeded to flourish in very different cultures, across a wide range of time. Bullough sums up the reasons for castration quite nicely: control and domination, punishment, political reasons, need for special qualities or abilities, religious requirements, sexual or erotic reasons, and medical or health reasons (2002: 5). Before we examine these reasons any further, a little must be said about the physical act of castration, and the physiological characteristics of eunuchs.

There were a number of ways to castrate a man, which is reflected in the terminology used to describe a eunuch (spadon = tear off; ektomias = cut off; thlibiae = to press, squeeze, pinch; thlasiae = to crush, bruise). Pliny and Columella offer a wealth of information on how to castrate various animals (see Chapter 3), but there is relatively little to be found regarding the process of castrating human beings. The 7th c. doctor, Paul of Aegina describes two methods of castration in his *Epitome of Medicine* (6.68). The first is by compression, in which a young boy is placed in a bath of hot water, so as to soften the testicles which are then squeezed with the fingers until they disappear.

He then relates the process of excision. In this method, the subject is placed on a bench, and the scrotum with the testicles is stretched out. Two incisions are made with a scalpel, one in each testicle. The testicles are then dissected around and cut out. Paul says that excision was preferred to compression, since those who underwent compression often faced venereal disease later on.

⁴ I hesitate to mention this, as neither Scholz nor Cheney provide the source for this information, and I have not been able to locate it.

This passage is indicative of castration practices, especially in classical and late antiquity, in several ways. For one thing, most eunuchs had only their testicles removed. Although some had the penis removed as well, this was a much more dangerous procedure, and most died as a result (especially from blood loss and infection). And note too that compression was effective only with young boys. Those who had reached sexual maturity almost always underwent surgical removal of the testicles.

The age of the castrate played a large role in the physical appearance and abilities of the eunuch as well. If castrated before puberty (which was most common), a eunuch would retain the high-pitched voice of a boy, which is most commonly associated with the operatic *castrati* of the 16th-19th centuries. The combination of a boy's larynx and a man's chest and lungs gave the voice a unique quality (Bullough 2002: 4).⁵ Pre-pubescent castrates also tended towards mild obesity and gigantism (Scholz 2000: 16), and usually had very smooth skins, often covered with a network of fine wrinkles (Hopkins 1978: 193-4). Beardlessness and weakened muscular structure ("shapelessness" and "looseness of joints" according to Aristotle, *Pr.* 10.36) were also characteristic of eunuchs (Bullough 2002: 4).

Those eunuchs castrated after puberty, provided the testicles alone were removed, could and often did retain their sex drive (Scholz 2000: 17). The suprarenal glands would produce other male hormones, making erection and ejaculation possible (Tougher, 1997: 177). However, they too would have little to no facial and body hair.⁶

⁵ Quintilian (*Inst.* 11.3.19) characterizes this sound as "feeble" or "shrill" (*exilitas*) like a woman or invalid, but Pliny asserts that even castrated men have louder voices than women (*HN* 11.269-70).

⁶ Pliny says that although the hair of castrated men no longer grows, what they had at birth does not fall off (*HN* 11.230). He also says that loss of hair, or baldness, is unknown amongst eunuchs (*HN* 11.131).

Some, like Xenophon (*Cyr.* 7.5.62-3), believed that castration made men more docile, just as it did animals. Hopkins states that modern comparative studies have shown this to be true, although in certain cases, hypogonads show compensating aggressiveness (1978: 193). Such studies have also shown that eunuchs have a normal range of intelligence (Hopkins, 1978: 193). As to the question of gender and sexuality, I hope to address this in the context of the paper, especially in Chapter 2.⁷ This area is particularly tricky, since our modern definition of gender and that of the ancient Romans may have varied considerably.

Katherine Ringrose's article is one of the few to discuss this controversial issue with regard to eunuchs (1994). Aristotle and Galen adhere to a single-sex structure, a "ladder" of sexuality, where those with the ultimate masculine attributes (heat, dryness, hairiness, fertility, appropriate male behavior, etc.) represent perfection (Ringrose 1994: 87 ff.).⁸ Women are at the bottom of the ladder, with young boys gradually ascending as they mature. Even in a bipolar model, where women and men represent complete opposites, eunuchs are an anomaly. While eunuchs are considered more masculine than women and children, they are forever stuck somewhere in the middle (Ringrose 1994: 87). Ringrose sums it up nicely:

⁷ This is not the purpose of this paper however. To the best of my knowledge, the issues of gender and sexuality, concerning eunuchs in Greek and Roman society, have yet to be covered comprehensively, in one volume. The works of Cantarella (1992) and Williams (1999) are helpful, and see especially K. Ringrose (1994).

⁸ For more on how physical appearance relates to the perception of gender, see Maud W. Gleason, "The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century C.E." in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (eds.) *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*. Princeton, 1990: 389-415.

Whether the conceptualization of gender was bipolar or single-sex oriented, however, it remained difficult to define individuals who neither conformed to accepted polarities nor progressed along the ladder that bridged the sexual polarities and led to the male ideal.

Suffice it to say, eunuchs were regarded as abnormal, and even monstrous by some. For example, Quintilian (*Inst.* 5.12.19) has this to say:

But I take Nature for my guide and regard any man whatsoever as fairer to view than a eunuch (*spado*), nor can I believe that Providence is ever so indifferent to what itself has created as to allow weakness to be an excellence, nor again can I think that the knife can render beautiful that which, if produced in the natural course of birth, would be regarded as a monster.⁹

At this point, let us return briefly to our discussion of the reasons behind castration, which also provide an historical overview of eunuchs. From very early times, eunuchs could be found at the ruling courts of China, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, and Egypt, and later in the Roman and Byzantine empires. Most of the research done on eunuchs relates to their position and influence in such places,¹⁰ and this will be discussed further in the context of Chapter 3. Therefore I will say no more here.

Most eunuchs were of course slaves. We know from Herodotus that they were commonly sold in the slave markets at Ephesus and Sardis, where they were valued for their trustworthiness (8.105). They were also quite expensive. Scholz calculates that ca. 2nd-1st c. B.C.E., the average slave cost about 500 denars, whereas a eunuch would bring around 2000 denars (2000: 113). Pliny (*HN* 7.129) relates the exorbitant price paid for Paezon, who was one of Sejanus's eunuchs (*e spadonibus Seiani*). Clutorius Priscus paid

⁹ Translated by H.E. Butler, Cambridge 1921.

¹⁰ For a general overview of court eunuchs, see especially Guyot (1980). On China see Shih-shan Henry Tsai, "Eunuch Power in Imperial China," in Tougher 2002: 221-233. On Assyria, see A.K. Grayson, "Eunuchs in power. Their role in the Assyrian bureaucracy," in M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (eds.) *Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden*, Neukirchen, 1995: 85-98. See Llewellyn-Jones 2002: 19-49 on Persia.

50 million sesterces for him. This was of course excessive, but it tells us that eunuchs were highly valued.

We know that eunuchs appeared in private upper-class households as early as the 5th c. B.C.E. in Greece, and by the 2nd c. B.C.E. in Rome (Guyot 1980: 67-68). Eunuchs often acted as bed- or bath-chamber attendants, especially for the women of the household. As such, they developed intimate relationships with their masters and/or mistresses, and often acted as their sexual partners. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 2.

There was one important reason for castration which will receive little attention in this paper: religion. Castration appears to have been associated with religion from the earliest times. In mother-goddess religions, it was done as part of fertility rituals. The Egyptian gods Seth and Osiris had both been castrated (and then restored) (Scholz 2000: 32). Castration even appears in Greek mythology, with the dismemberment of Uranus by Cronus (whence springs Aphrodite). But castration in antiquity was most often associated with the cult of Cybele/Magna Mater.

Once again, the cult of Cybele/Magna Mater has been covered adequately by modern scholars,¹¹ so only brief mention need be made. But this cult obviously played a substantial role in Roman society, as evidenced by the writings of Catullus (63) and Ovid (*Fast.* 179-372) among others. References to the *galli*, the eunuch priests of this cult, are abundant, and as Marilyn Skinner puts it,

Widespread interest in a divine figure so intimately associated with religious emasculation, monstrous sex-role transformation, and orgiastic frenzy would

¹¹ For the best general introduction to this cult in Rome, see Mary Beard, "The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the 'Great Mother' in Imperial Rome" in Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Shamanism, History and the State*, Ann Arbor 1994: 164-190.

suggest that, for contemporary Romans, the myth and cult of Magna Mater must have possessed profound symbolic meanings. (1998: 141)

It is the hope of the author that the above sections will provide the reader with sufficient background information to follow the arguments forthcoming. These matters will also be elaborated on in the course of the paper, as we look at the specific evidence provided by the terms *spado* and *castratus*.

Search Results

As seen above, there were numerous Greek and Latin terms for a eunuch. However, we are interested in only two: the noun *spado* and the substantive adjective/perfect passive participle *castratus*. A search of the corpus of Latin literature was conducted using the PHI CD ROM #5.3 software program. In this section, I would like to briefly discuss the results of the search itself, before attempting to analyze and categorize those results.

Let us begin with the term *spado*. The search was done so as to pick up all the various inflections of the word. A total of ninety-five instances were found, from twenty different authors.¹² Quintus Curtius Rufus's *Historiarum Alexandri Magni Macedonis* was found to contain the word *spado* (or one of its inflections) eighteen times, more than any other author. The corpus of law attributed to Justinian uses the term fifteen times, and Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* uses it twelve times. Martial uses *spado* in his *Epigrammata* a total of eight times, by far the most frequent use of the word in verse. In fact, of those twenty authors, only three are poets (Martial, Juvenal and Horace). *Spado* seems to have been used more commonly by historians (besides Curtius Rufus, Tacitus uses the term six times, and Suetonius does so four times).

¹² Please see Appendix A for a listing of all the results.

The term *spado* also seems to have been used across a wide time span. It appears as early as the first century B.C.E., in authors such as Horace and Livy, until well into the fourth century C.E. (*Historia Augusta*) and later (Justinian).¹³ It seems to have been used most frequently in authors dating to the first and second centuries C.E.: Collumela, Annius Florus, Gaius, Juvenal, Martial, Petronius, Pliny the Elder, Pomponius Porphyrio, the *Priapea*, Quintillian, Seneca the Younger, Suetonius, Tacitus and Valerius Maximus all date to this period.

Next, we have the search for *castratus*. Again, the search was designed to pick up all inflections, by searching for “castrat*.” A total of fifty-nine results were found, from fourteen authors. However, these results are somewhat misleading. A number of the passages cited contained the noun *castratio* or some form of the verb *castrare*, which may provide useful information on castration in general, but were not pertinent in this instance. Also, in most of these cases, the passage was speaking of animal castration or referring to vegetative life. Some of these instances, especially those found in Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* and Columella’s *De re rustica* will however be important in making comparisons between *spado* and *castratus* in a later section.

Of those fifty-nine hits, only thirteen employ the desired terminology and refer to human beings.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that *castratus* is found *only* in prose authors. Justinian’s *Digest* has the most occurrences of *castratus* (when speaking of men) with six instances.¹⁵ Curtius Rufus makes use of the term in this context twice, as does Pliny the

¹³ With the exception of Justinian, occurrences found in authors later than the 2nd century C.E. will not be used. Most of these occurrences have been adequately dealt with by late Roman/ Byzantine scholars.

¹⁴ For complete search results, see Appendix B.

¹⁵ *Castratus* is found a total of ten times in the *Digest*, however four are references to animals. These four references *are* relevant to this paper, and will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Elder. Aulus Cornelius Celsus, Seneca the Elder, and Seneca the Younger all use the term once. *Castratus*, like *spado*, is found primarily in authors of the first and second centuries C.E., especially when referring to humans.

Since the primary function of this paper is to compare the usage of the terms *spado* and *castratus*, those authors who use both terms are of particular interest. There are six authors who do so: Columella, Curtius Rufus, Pliny, Seneca the Elder, Seneca the Younger, and Justinian. Moreover, there are several passages where both terms occur simultaneously. Curtius Rufus uses *spado* and *castratus* together in book 10.1.37 of his *Historiarum Alexandri Magni Macedonis*. Pliny uses the two terms in the same sentence in book 15.51.7 of his *Naturalis Historia*, and then in close proximity at 24.72.4 and 24.72.7. And of course the *Digest* finds *castratus* and *spado* together on a number of occasions, which will be the basis of Chapter 4.

However, in the three remaining authors, the terms do not occur in the same passage, and often they occur in wholly separate works. But it is still useful to look at these passages closely, to try and determine whether the author had any predilection for using one term in a certain context, relative to the other. This holds true for the passages in which only one of the terms occurs as well. We must look at the results both individually and as a whole in order to gain a better idea of how these two terms were used, what they represented, and what they can contribute to our knowledge of eunuchs in general. In order to do so, I have divided the results into three major categories, based on genre: poetry, prose, and legal texts.

CHAPTER 2 SPADO IN POETRY

As stated above, the use of *castratus* to represent a eunuch is not found in any author of poetry. Therefore, we must look at *spado* alone. But it too is relatively rare in verse. The word is found once in Horace, eight times in Martial, and three times in Juvenal. Due to the limited number of references, I shall address each one individually, as well as within the context of that author, and finally within the genre as a whole.

Horace

Chronologically speaking, Horace is the first extant poet to use the term *spado*. He does so in *Epode* 9, line 13, which was published ca. 30 B.C.E:

*Romanus eheu---posteri negabitis---
emancipatus feminae
fert vallum et arma miles et spadonibus
servire rugosis potest*

Epode 9 is addressed to Maecenas, and the author is speaking to him concerning the events of 31 B.C.E. The *femina* to whom he refers is Cleopatra, and the *spadones* are her lieutenants. Antony and his followers have been reduced to fighting for a woman, at the behest of her “shriveled” eunuch commanders. Horace effectively emasculates Antony with his words. In doing so, he also tells us that there were eunuchs at Cleopatra’s court, some in positions of military authority. Eastern kingdoms were often derided by Roman authors for their elaborate trains of eunuchs, and the authority given to such men.

Eunuchs were the ultimate sign of effeminacy and deceitfulness. Horace uses this stereotype to good effect in *Epode* 9.¹

Martial

Martial published the twelve books of his *Epigrammata* from ca. 87-ca. 102 C.E. In all, there are eight instances of the word *spado* in the *Epigrammata*, which appear in books 2, 5, 6, 10, and 11. The passages in Martial are especially useful in giving us an idea of how eunuchs were perceived by the average Roman citizen. Martial's biting wit spared no one, especially the castrated man. One thing important to note, Martial also uses the terms *eunuchus* and *gallus* in his poems when speaking of eunuchs.² However, due to the scope of this paper, we shall look at only those passages where *spado* is used.

The first instance of *spado* comes in book 2, poem 54:

*Quid de te, Line, suspicetur uxor
et qua parte uelit pudiciorem,
certis indiciis satis probauit,
custodem tibi quae dedit spadonem.
Nil nasutius hac maligniusque.*

In this poem, Martial addresses Linus, whose wife has set a eunuch to watch him, because she is suspicious and wishes him to be more chaste in "some way". The fact that she has enlisted the help of a eunuch of course implies that he is being sexually promiscuous somehow. It would seem that Linus had a taste for young boys, whose

¹ Cf. Seneca, Ben. 5.16.6.8. Here, Seneca also alludes to Cleopatra's court, saying that Antony wished to make Rome subject to the Egyptian queen, even to the point of paying tribute to eunuchs (*spadonibus*).

² This is true of numerous other authors as well, but is of special importance here. Martial uses *eunuchus* a total of 5 times (3.58.32, 3.82.15, 6.67.1, 8.44.15, 10.91.1) and *gallus* (meaning eunuch) at least nine times (1.35.15, 2.45.2, 3.24.13, 3.81.1, 3.81.5, 5.41.3, 11.72.2, 11.74.2, 13.63.2). It would be very interesting to do a study on all the references to eunuchs found in Martial, a topic the author hopes to pursue at a later date.

youthful good looks were often preserved by castration, and the *spado* was offered as a substitute.

This is a good place to stop and look briefly at sexual lives of Roman men. I believe that Cantarella (1992) and Williams (1999), respectively, argue effectively that Roman homosexuality developed independently of Greek practices. From the earliest days of Rome, a man's virility was determined by his ability to assert his dominance over other people, regardless of their gender. As Cantarella so aptly puts it, "In order to become a *civis romanus* worthy of the name, he had to learn from the earliest age never to submit, and to impose his will on everybody – including his sexual will" (1992: 98). And so it developed that "masculinity" was determined not by the gender of one's sexual partner, but by taking the insertive, or "active" role in all sexual relations.

There were however some limitations on a Roman's sexual proclivities. Romans were prohibited by law from pursuing free-born citizens, male or female, outside of marriage (Williams 1999: 19). That left slaves, prostitutes and non-citizens. Of these, one's household slaves were by far the most easily accessible. And, "why should he refrain from sodomizing his houseboys, whose domestic duties included the obligation to let him have his way with them?" (Cantarella 1992: 120).

But the effects of Hellenization were gradually felt in all areas of Roman life, sexual practices included. By the 2nd century B.C.E., the Romans had begun to openly court free-born boys (Cantarella 1992: 120). Boys were desired for their smooth skin and youthful beauty. It was the growth of the beard and body hair that signaled a boy's transformation to manhood, and thereby the end of his desirability as a passive sex

partner.³ Since castration served to prolong these very qualities, it is not at all surprising to find wealthy men castrating their slaves for sexual purposes.⁴

Let us leave this for the moment and look at the next example, found in book 5, the first line of poem 41:

*Spadone cum sis euiratior fluxo,
et concubino mollior Celaenaeo,
quem sectus ululat matris enthae Gallus,
theatra loqueris et gradus et edicta
trabeasque et Idus fibulasque censusque,
et pumicata pauperes manu monstras.
Sedere in equitum liceat an tibi scamnis
uidebo, Didyme: non licet maritorum.*

Here, Martial calls Didymus “more emasculate than a flabby eunuch,” and “softer than the concubine of Celaenae.” *Mollis*, “soft,” was an almost technical term used to describe those who assumed the passive role in sex (Cantarella 1992: 112). He also speaks of a “*sectus gallus*,” a *gallus* being perhaps the most-frightening thing for a Roman man (Williams 1999: 177). While Martial says that he will consider whether Didymus deserves to sit amongst the *equites*, he says that he is surely not allowed to sit in the seats of the married men.⁵ This poem is basically insulting Didymus for his effeminacy in every way possible. Interesting to note, the name Didymus is quite ironic here, as διδυμοι commonly means “testicles” in Greek epigram.

³ See Horace, *Odes*, 4.10.

⁴ For more on the castration of young boys for lustful purposes, see Petronius, *Sat.* 119.19 ff. and especially Seneca the Elder: “[wealthy men] own troops of castrated youths (*greges castratorum*), they cut their darlings, to fit them to submit to their lusts over a longer period; and because they are themselves ashamed of being men, they make sure that as few men exist as possible” (trans. by M. Winterbottom, Cambridge, 1974).

⁵ See Suetonius, *Aug.* 44.2 on Augustus’s division of seats at public performances.

Martial then uses *spado* twice in book 6, poem 2:

*Lusus erat sacrae conubia taedae,
 lusus et immeritos exsecuisse mares.
 Vltraque tu prohibes, Caesar, populisque futuris
 succurris, nasci quos sine fraude iubes.
 Nec spado iam nec moechus erit te praeside quisquam:
 at prius--o mores--et spado moechus erat.*

This poem is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, Martial is praising Domitian's legislation against castration.⁶ By legislating against adultery and castration, the number of legitimately born Roman children will increase. Secondly, this poem is the first to imply that some eunuchs were indeed capable of maintaining an erection long enough to engage in penetrative sex. Both of the two previous poems seem to imply that eunuchs were usually involved in passive, homosexual relationships. However, 6.2 is the first to imply that eunuchs were also involved in relationships with married women, most likely their own mistresses. As stated in Chapter 1, it was physically possible for a eunuch to maintain an erection if he had been castrated after puberty. And since intercourse with a eunuch was virtually guaranteed not to result in pregnancy, it was the ideal solution for a married woman looking to have an affair.⁷

Which brings us to poem 39 in book 6. In this poem, Martial pokes fun at Cinna, whose wife's sexual exploits are revealed by her children's resemblances to family slaves. Of her seven children, one was fathered by the cook, another by the wrestling coach, another by the baker, another by the catamite Lygdus, another by the deformed Cyrta, another by the flautist and the last by the overseer. Martial says that her brood

⁶ See below, Chapter 4, for further discussion of this legislation and its impact.

⁷ Cf. Juvenal 6.366 ff., which is discussed in detail below.

would be as big as Niobe's,⁸ "*si spado Coreseus Dindymusque non esset.*" Of course, this can be taken two ways. Perhaps Martial is saying that she would have had children by Coreseus and Dindymus if they had not been impotent. But in light of 6.2, I rather think he is implying that she did have relations with these two eunuchs, but escaped pregnancy because of their sterility.

This brings us to poem 52 in book 10:

*Thelyn viderat in toga spadonem,
Damnatum Numa dixit esse moecham.*

Numa sees the eunuch Thelys wearing a toga and says that he is a convicted adulteress. It is interesting to note the feminine name Thelys and the feminine gender of "*damnatum moecham.*" *θηλυς* is actually the Greek word for the feminine gender! A convicted adulteress was required to wear the toga like a prostitute.⁹ Most likely, Thelys had been caught in an affair with a married woman (again lending credence to 6.2 above), and because of his feminine name and appearance, called him a *moecha* rather than a *moechus*. This is an important passage in showing that *spadones* were not considered men at all, a discussion which I would like to put off until the end of this chapter.

At 11.75.6, *spado* seems to represent that asexual, impotent slave of 2.54, rather than the lecherous adulterers of 6.2 and 10.52. In this poem, the author berates Caelia for covering her slave's penis with a sheath in the baths. Martial takes this to mean that Caelia doesn't want to see the slave's penis. He continues with,

⁸ The number of Niobe's children varies, but Sappho's version puts the number at nine boys and nine girls. Shackleton Bailey notes that Martial seems to have converted this number to nine total (1993, Vol. II: 31).

⁹ See note to 10.52 in Shackleton Bailey (1993, Vol. II: 375).

*Quare cum populo lavis ergo?
Omnes an tibi nos sumus spadones?
Ergo, ne videaris invidere,
servo, Caelia, fibulam remitte.*

In this case, *spado* seems to mean impotent and unmanly. The other men are the real eunuchs, whereas Caelia's slave is the only one who has anything worth covering.

The last occurrence of *spado* appears in book 11 as well, this time in poem 81:

*Cum sene communem vexat spado Dindymus Aeglen
et jacet in medio sicca puella toro.
Viribus hic, operi non est hic utilis annis:
ergo sine effectu prurit utrique labor.
Supplex illa rogat pro se miserisque duobus,
hunc juvenem facias, hunc, Cytherea, virum.*

Once again we have a eunuch named Dindymus, who is attempting to have sex with the girl Aegle, along with an old man. Old men and eunuchs are not the ideal partners in such a scene. Both prove to be impotent. There is not much to be done in either case, short of praying to Cytherea to make one young, and the other a man. Alone, this passage would lead one to believe that eunuchs were not able to engage in penetrative sex, although the desire to do so is there.

Clearly, the term *spado* is used to represent a eunuch by Martial. However, he does not really shed any light on the question of whether a *spado* had to have been castrated surgically or not. And he seems to be as confused about the sexual abilities of eunuchs as the rest of us. Were they lustful or asexual? Impotent or not? Homosexual or heterosexual?¹⁰ Before attempting to answer any of these questions, we should look at Juvenal's use of *spado*.

¹⁰ I use these two terms only to distinguish between a same-sex relationship and a male-female relationship. As far as possible, the modern connotations and associations must be avoided, as the ancient perception of sexuality differs widely from the modern perception. For more on this topic, see especially Williams (1999) and Cantarella (1992).

Juvenal

Very little is known about the life of the Roman satirist Juvenal. He is believed to have lived from ca. 55 C.E. to ca. 140 C.E. He was a contemporary of Martial, who mentions him three times in the *Epigrammata*. Juvenal's *Satires* are known for their tone of angry indignance. He could hardly avoid mentioning eunuchs in some context, when speaking of the faults and vices of those living in Rome. Like Martial, Juvenal does not limit himself to the term *spado* when referring to eunuchs. But once again, we must restrict ourselves to this one term.

Juvenal uses the term *spado* a total of three times, once each in *Satires* 1, 6, and 14. The first instance comes in line 22 of *Satire* 1. In this poem, Juvenal is listing his reasons for writing satire, namely the fact that Rome has succumbed to such outrageous vices and excesses that it is nearly impossible to refrain from writing. The very first thing he offers as evidence of this moral decline is "*cum tener uxorem ducat spado.*" From the time of Augustus, laws such as the *Lex Papia Poppaea* had been established to encourage men to marry and have numerous children, thereby increasing the number of legitimate upper-class Roman citizens. The marriage of a Roman woman to a sterile eunuch shows a complete disregard for such laws and what they were trying to accomplish.

Juvenal then further elaborates on the role eunuchs play in the sexual depravity that has taken over the city. In *Satire* 6, he is attempting to dissuade a friend from marriage, by listing the faults of Roman wives. We are particularly interested in lines 366-378:

*sunt quas eunuchi inbelles ac mollia semper
oscula delectent et desperatio barbae
et quod abortiuo non est opus. illa uoluptas
summa tamen, quom iam calida matura iuuenta
inguina traduntur medicis, iam pectine nigro.
ergo expectatos ac iussos crescere primum
testiculos, postquam coeperunt esse bilibres,*

*tonsonis tantum damno rapit Heliodorus.
mangonum pueros uera ac miserabilis urit
debilitas, follisque pudet cicerisque relictis.
conspicuus longe cunctisque notabilis intrat
balnea nec dubie custodem uitis et horti
prouocat a domina factus spado. dormiat ille
cum domina, sed tu iam durum, Postume, iamque
tondendum eunucho Bromium committere noli.*

Although the word *spado* does not appear until line 376, the entire passage is relevant. It is especially interesting to note the use of *eunuchus* here as well. Both terms seem to represent a castrated man, who has had only his testicles removed by the surgeon.

These twelve lines offer a wealth of information about eunuchs, as well as the sexual relationship between mistress and slave, rather than master and slave. First of all, it is clear that Juvenal, and thereby his audience, knew that there was a difference between those who had been castrated before puberty, and those castrated after puberty. He presents the young boys of the slave-dealer as the victims of true lameness or impotence (*vera debilitas*), who are ashamed of the pouch and chickpea they have left.

Whereas the kind of eunuch you really want to have is one who was not castrated until he had reached manhood (*matura, pectine nigro*) and his testicles had come to weigh two pounds, especially if you were a woman. Then, only the barber loses his business.¹¹ He is still able to get an erection, which in fact rivals the guardian of the vine and garden, Priapus, in size (line 375).

Also, there is reason beyond his beardless face for choosing a eunuch as a lover. Most importantly is the fact that he is sterile, and therefore “*abortivo non est opus.*”¹² A woman did not risk pregnancy in an affair with a eunuch. Hence the slave in the poem

¹¹ Eunuchs tended to wear their hair long. See Rudd and Barr 1991: 178, n.373.

¹² Cf. K. Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World*, London 2002.

was made a eunuch “*a domina.*” Surely this was safer than having children who looked like the cook, as Martial speaks of in *Ep* 6.39. As Juvenal says, let the eunuch sleep with his mistress, as it does no harm. But Juvenal warns Postumus to keep him away from the recently matured Bromius, who is ready for a trip to the barber. William Bar suggests that Bromius was a boy beloved by Postumus, who would be injured by a eunuch as well endowed as this one (Rudd and Barr 1991: 178, n.378).

The third and last occurrence of *spado* is found in Satire 14, line 91: *ut spado uincebat Capitolia nostra Posides*. Here, we move away from the sexual and into the realm of politics and general decline. In this satire, Juvenal is speaking of how bad traits are passed from parent to child. He mentions a man who is obsessed with building elaborate residences from one side of Italy to the other. It is here that he refers to Posides the eunuch, whose house outshone even the capital. In this case, *spado* is merely identifying Posides as a eunuch. However, it takes on greater significance when we are told by Suetonius that this Posides was one of Claudius’s favorite freedmen.¹³ Claudius was harshly criticized for his reliance on slaves and freedmen, and the fact that one of his most trusted advisors was a eunuch would have only added to the belief that they were deceitful and untrustworthy.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the occurrences of *spado* in Horace, Martial and Juvenal can be divided into two basic categories: sexual and not sexual. Considering the works of all three men, this is not all that surprising. And really, only the last instance from Juvenal (14.91) has no sexual overtones. Horace (*Epod.* 9.13) uses a sexual smear to make a

¹³ Suetonius, *Claud.* 28.1. See Chapter 3 for further discussion of eunuchs in positions of political power, especially in imperial courts.

political attack, which takes prominence. In both of these cases, a eunuch is mentioned to further discredit a political figure (i.e. Marc Antony and Claudius, respectively).

All of the occurrences in Martial, and the remaining two from Juvenal have some sort of sexual implication. Again, considering the genres, this is to be expected. Martial and Juvenal are especially important to us because, as Cantarella says, “[In their works] we find not only the sensibility and personal tastes of the authors, but also a varied world of characters whose features and defects...are indicative of the lifestyle, sexual habits, and self-image of the virile Roman” (1992: 148). These poems provide insight as to how the Romans perceived eunuchs sexually. Or rather, how they weren’t quite sure where to put them. They were lustful and asexual; impotent and not impotent. And can we even say homosexual and heterosexual? Suffice it to say, they enjoyed sexual relations with both men and women.

It seems to me that a eunuch would have been the ideal sexual partner for a Roman man or woman (outside of marriage). First of all, they were normally slaves, which made the relationship legal and convenient. A prepubescent castrate would have been ideal for a man. His beardless face and smooth body were guaranteed to remain longer than that of the average *puer*, and his acceptance of the passive role was a foregone conclusion. A man’s *virilitas* was in no danger around such a eunuch. As for a woman, the physical qualities of the eunuch were also appealing. But for her, a post-pubescent castrate would have been just the thing. He could maintain an erection, and they could enjoy intercourse without fear of pregnancy.

Obviously, physical characteristics and abilities differed from one eunuch to the next. This leads to a lot of confusion as to how to classify a eunuch. The inconsistencies

themselves are quite telling. *Spadones* were not men, nor were they women. They fall into some middle category, indistinct and nameless. Did they constitute a third gender? The answer to that question is complicated and difficult, and this brief survey cannot hope to answer it.

One final thing that is important to note, none of these passages seems to imply that the term *spado* was applied only to non-surgically castrated men. In fact, Juvenal's use of *spado* in 6.376 refers specifically to a man who had been surgically castrated. By and far, the term is used in poetry to generally represent a eunuch, who in some way, shape or form, has lost the ability to procreate.

CHAPTER 3 *SPADO AND CASTRATUS* IN PROSE

Most of the occurrences of *spado* and *castratus* are found in prose authors, and there are a variety of ways in which these results could be grouped and analyzed. The great majority of these occurrences, however, can be placed into *at least* one of four categories, based on the context of the passage: the first category is all of those passages that refer to animals and/or plant life, rather than human beings; second are those passages dealing with eunuchs as servants or attendants (especially in Eastern courts); third are those where eunuchs are seen examples of immorality and wickedness, and in some cases as murderers; the fourth and final category is all the occurrences found in legal texts or related to the law. This last category is of particular interest and will be dealt with separately in Chapter 4. By looking at the search results in this manner, we are best able to understand how these terms were used and what they represented in Roman literature and society.

Animal/Plant References

It is useful to look briefly at *spado* and *castratus* when used for animal and plant life. Two authors are of particular interest in this case: Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella and Gaius Plinius Secundus. Columella flourishes around 50 C.E., and his *De Re Rustica* is an agricultural manual in twelve books. Pliny is a contemporary of Columella's, and quotes him in his own *Naturalis Historia*. While Pliny's work also deals with animal, plant and mineral knowledge, he looks closely at human life too. This is one difference between the authors: all of Columella's references to *spadones* or

castrati are to plants and animals, whereas Pliny uses *spado* for humans as well. A closer examination of the authors is even more revealing.

Let us look at *spado* first. Columella uses this term only once, at book 3.10.15.2: *Itaque ut ad consuetudinem agricolarum revertar, eiusmodi surculos, qui nihil attulerint, spadones appellant; quod non facerent, nisi suspicarentur inhabiles frugibus*, or “And so, to return to the usage of the farmers, they give the name *spadones* or eunuchs to that sort of shoots which have produced nothing; which they would not do if they did not suppose them to be incapable of bearing.”¹

Pliny uses *spado* in much the same way. At *HN* 13.38.8 he says that young palms are called *spadones*, as long as they have no seeds inside them (*nullo intus pomi lingo*). He goes on to speak of the royal palm, which grew only at Babylon in the garden of Bagoüs: *ita vocant spadones, qui apud eos etiam regnare* (*HN* 13.41). Bagoüs is the Persian word for a eunuch, “who were even kings in that land” (*ibid.*). Thus in speaking of palms, Pliny tells us that eunuchs could and did hold positions of great power in Persian courts.²

A lack of seeds also gives rise to the “eunuch-apple” of the Belgians (Pliny, *HN* 15.51.7). This passage is especially interesting because we find forms of *castratus* and *spado* in the same sentence: *...a conditione castrati seminis quae spadonia appellant Belgae*. The apple is called a eunuch because it seems to have been castrated. *Spado* was

¹ Translated by H.B. Ash, Cambridge and London 1941.

² This is discussed further in the next section.

also used to describe a reed which produced little or no down: *modica lanugine aut omnino nulla spadonum nomine insignis* (*HN* 16.169.11).

Castratus, on the other hand, almost always refers to animals. Columella usually uses either the noun *castratio*, or the verb *castrare*, and avoids generally *castratus* as a substantive adjective or as a participle. However, he is very useful in telling us about the methods of castrating animals, some of which were not all that different from castrating humans.³

Pliny too usually refers to animals when speaking of a *castratus*, but the word does sometimes refer to plants.⁴ He uses it to describe stags, bees, horses, trees, vines, and wheat. He describes the castration of cocks as well, in much the same way as Columella (*HN* 10.50.1). My favorite passage in Pliny is at 30.148.3. In this section, he is speaking of the wonders of animals. He says, “*sorices fugare, si unus castratus emittatur,*” or “shrew mice are put to flight if one is castrated and let go.” There is an interesting parallel amongst human beings. To call a man a eunuch, especially a *gallus*, was one of the greatest insults you could make against a Roman. As Williams puts it, they were “ideological scare-figures for Roman men” (1999: 177). Apparently mice shared their fear of castration.

³ For instance, see *Rust.* 6.26.1 ff. for the castration of calves. He advises against the use of the knife, but says rather that the testicles should be compressed with a piece of cleft fennel and broken up gradually, when the calf is very young. If however the animal is older and tougher, he recommends cutting them out, which he describes in detail in this passage. Sheep were castrated in a similar way (*Rust.* 7.5.22.8). Columella describes two ways of castrating pigs, both involving an incision (*Rust.* 7.11.1 ff.). He also describes the castration of cocks, which were then called capons (*Rust.* 8.2.3 ff.).

⁴ There are two exceptions which refer to humans, 11.230.4 and 11.270.1, which will be discussed below.

So we see that *castratus* and related words are often used when speaking of animals or even plants, and most often refer to the act of castration itself. *Spado* however is used only when speaking of plants that cannot reproduce. The early 7th century author Isidore tells us that, “*spadones sunt surculi fruge carentes, ex ipsa appellatione, quod sint inhabiles fructu et sterilitate affecti*” (*Etymol.* 17.5.6). This actually fits well with the use of these terms in the *Digest*, as will be seen in Chapter 4, rather than with what we have seen thus far, especially in poetry.

Eunuchs as Slaves or Attendants

A number of the prose passages which contain the word *spado* are references to eunuchs as slaves or attendants, especially in Eastern courts. Peter Guyot was one of the first to tackle this subject in his *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike*. We have already seen from the passages in Chapter 2 that eunuchs were kept as household slaves by upper-class Romans. Due to their expense, they were often seen as a status symbol. The two uses of *spado* in Petronius’s *Satyricon* serve just this purpose. Trimalchio’s great wealth is attested by the presence of two eunuch slaves (*spadones*) at the baths, one of whom holds a silver chamber pot, as the other keeps track of the game Trimalchio is playing (*Sat.* 27.3.2). Shortly thereafter, the first eunuch steps forward with the chamber pot so that Trimalchio can empty his bladder (*Sat.* 27.5.3).

Besides acting as a status symbol, these eunuchs offer further evidence that it was common for such people to attend to the most private affairs of their masters. Their “sexless” status made them the ideal bedroom attendants for both men and women. It was this function and the ability to get exceptionally close to the person of their master that led to the rise of “court” eunuchs.

We know that at some point of history, eunuchs were part of the royal staff, or even government officials, in China, India, Persia, Rome, Byzantium and many Islamic countries (Bullough 2002: 7). For instance, all eighteen occurrences of *spado* found in Quintus Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander the Great* fall into the category of "court" eunuchs. He also uses *castratus* twice in this manner. All of these passages relate to the Persian king Darius III (ruled from 336-330 B.C.E.) in some way or another. In many cases, the author is mentioning some attendant of the king or his wife who performs a minor task or delivers a message.⁵ We can see by the abundant references to eunuchs that they must have played a very active role in the Persian court.⁶ In fact, Rufus tells us that it was very common to find a herd of eunuchs in the king's entourage⁷, and that they were not at all despised by "those people".⁸ The way Rufus states this clearly shows that his fellow Romans felt just the opposite.

We see this anti-eunuch attitude further fleshed out in the character of Bagoas, who is by far the most infamous *spado* found in the *History*.⁹ Alexander received a variety of gifts from Darius's general Nabarzanes. Rufus says, "*inter quae Bagoas erat, specie singulari spado atque in ipso flore pueritiae, cui et Dareus assuerat et mox*

⁵ Cf. 3.12.5.1, 3.12.17, 4.10.18.1, 4.10.25.1, 4.10.34.3, 5.11.4.2, 5.12.9.6, 5.12.12.1, 5.12.15.4.

⁶ For more on this, see Llewellyn-Jones (2002). He notes that eunuchs were especially influential at the Assyrian court from the 12th-7th centuries B.C.E. and amongst the Achaemenid kings of Persia in the 5th-4th centuries B.C.E. Many eunuchs wielded considerable power, giving rise to the characterization of eunuchs as "king-makers" (ibid. 38). In the ancient sources, see especially the accounts of Ktesias.

⁷ Livy mentions Darius's train of eunuchs as well (*AUC* 9.17.16.2). This is one of only two times that Livy uses the term *spado* (the other being at 35.15.4.3).

⁸ Curtius Rufus 3.3.23.3, and also 5.1.6.4. Alexander attempted to imitate Darius's household by keeping 365 concubines who were attended by herds of eunuchs, whom Curtius Rufus says were also accustomed to prostitute themselves (6.6.8.3).

⁹ For more on Bagoas, see Badian, E. "The Eunuch Bagoas: a study in method," *CQ* 8 (1958): 144-57.

Alexander assuevit,” or that “among those gifts was Bagoas, a eunuch of extraordinary beauty and in the very bloom of boyhood, whom Darius had been intimate with, and soon after Alexander was intimate with as well” (6.5.23.2). Bagoas became very dear to Alexander, and exercised a great deal of influence. For instance, the satrap Orsines refused to honor Bagoas because of his sexual relationship with Alexander, saying that it was not the custom of the Persians to mate with males who made females of themselves through prostitution (10.1.25-26). However, we know this was not true, as Bagoas had originally been the consort of Darius. Most likely, Orsines was angered at the influence Bagoas seemed to wield, and was looking to slight him.

As it turns out, Orsines underestimated just how much influence Bagoas had. He began to slander Orsines at every opportunity, even when he and Alexander were in bed (10.1.29). He eventually succeeded in having Orsines arrested and executed. Bagoas laid his hand upon him just as he was to be executed, and Orsines turned to him and said, “*Audieram...in Asia olim regnasse feminas; hoc vero novum est, regnare castratum!*” or “I had heard that women once ruled in Asia; but this is a new thing indeed, for a eunuch to be king” (10.1.37).¹⁰

The story of Bagoas is especially indicative of the role eunuchs would come to play in the courts of late Roman emperors. One of the primary causes of the vilification of eunuchs was the result of this fear of their influence and power. In some cases it was justified. Eunuchs were afforded a unique opportunity to gain access to the emperor,

¹⁰ Note that this is the one and only section in the *History* where *spado* and *castratus* are found in close proximity. Also, Rufus says that Darius himself gained the throne of Persia not by right of succession, but by the favor of the eunuch Bagoas (“*sed est in in sedem Cyri beneficio Bagoae, castrati hominis, admissus*”) at 6.3.12. This is a very different Bagoas than the one spoken of above. He was very influential under Artaxerxes III and IV (he actually poisoned them both), and was later poisoned himself by Darius. For more on this, see Diod. 17.5.3 ff.

originally as bed-chamber attendants or sometimes as lovers. However, Keith Hopkins, who has examined the role of court eunuchs in depth, says that “there is no evidence to suggest that eunuchs wielded power or consistently filled the post of chamberlain before the reign of Diocletian” (1978: 192).¹¹ So the rise of eunuchs to political prominence was a relatively late occurrence in the Roman world.

However, eunuchs gradually came to be indispensable advisors to Roman emperors, especially in the east. Why this sudden rise to prominence? I am inclined to agree with Hopkins:

It was not merely coincidental that all emperors appointed eunuchs to positions of power, nor was the power of eunuchs determined exclusively by the psychological make-up of each emperor. The continuing power position of eunuchs must be considered rather as a socio-political institution in itself, a patterned regularity, a phenomenon to be explained not only by its individual manifestations but with reference to other broad social factors. (1978: 181)

Hopkins then goes on to discuss some of these factors. He includes the tension between an absolutist monarch and the other powers of state, the seclusion of the emperor due to court ritual, the need for intermediaries between these groups and the ability of eunuchs to exploit this, the non-assimilability of eunuchs into the aristocracy, the cohesive but non-corporate nature of their corps, and finally their expertise as a result of the permanence of their positions (1978: 181 ff.).

So we have seen that eunuchs have been associated with court-life from very early times. They were a common sight especially in Eastern courts, which drew the derision and scorn of many Romans. In the Classical period, we find mention of a particular eunuch here and there, but they hold no significant political power. However, it was not

¹¹ Diocletian reigned from 284 – 305 C.E.

long before the Roman emperors themselves began to rely heavily on eunuchs, for a number of socio-political reasons. This particular area has been the topic of much of the modern research on eunuchs. Therefore we will leave it at this brief mention.

The Immorality and Wickedness of Eunuchs

The great majority of the remaining occurrences of *spado* have one thing in common: they all refer to some bad characteristic or evil deed of a eunuch. All of these passages reflect badly on the group as a whole. But in truth, one is hard pressed to find a favorable reference to a eunuch anywhere at all. Most of the passages considered in this paper would fit into this category. In looking merely at *spado* (and the few relevant occurrences of *castratus*), we obtain a pretty ugly picture of how a eunuch was perceived in the classical Roman world.¹²

As seen in the above section, the Romans looked down on eastern rulers who relied heavily on eunuchs. But as the principate progressed, this was a common feature of the Roman imperial court as well. The emperor Claudius (41-59 C.E.) was held in contempt by historians like Tacitus for his heavy reliance on slaves and freedmen. Suetonius relates an anecdote about Posides the eunuch, one of Claudius's favorite freedmen, to whom he gave the honor of the headless spear at the triumph for his British conquests (*Claud.* 28.1). Needless to say, this act did not go over well, especially with the soldiers who actually deserved such an honor.

Tacitus tells us that Vitellius's (emperor 69 C.E.) train grew more and more corrupt as he approached Rome. Mixed with the soldiers were actors, flocks of eunuchs,

¹² Were we to add in the terms *eunuchus* and *gallus*, we would have one great diatribe against these people.

and every other type of creature found in Nero's court (*Hist.* 2.71). We know that Nero (59-68 C.E.) had an affinity for eunuchs, and one in particular. Although Sporus is never described either as a *spado* or a *castratus*, his is a story worth mentioning. Suetonius reports that Nero attempted to turn the boy Sporus into a girl by castrating him (*Nero* 28). He then proceeded to "marry" Sporus, treating him lavishly and openly displaying his affection for his new "wife." Suetonius relates a joke that was going around at the time, saying that the world would have been a better place had Nero's father Domitian married that sort of wife.

We have seen numerous examples of the sexual depravity of eunuchs, and also of their burgeoning political influence and ambition. Murder, especially poisoning members of the imperial family, is often attributed to them as well. For instance, Annaeus Florus and both Seneca the Elder and Seneca the Younger mention Pompey's death at the hands (indirectly) of a eunuch.¹³

There are two deaths in particular that turn up in the search for *spado*: that of Drusus and that of Claudius. Drusus (c.13 B.C.E. – 23 C.E.) was the son of the emperor Tiberius. Tacitus reports that he was poisoned by the eunuch Lygdamus (at the instigation of Sejanus) which was found out eight years after the event (*Ann.* 4.8.3). He tells us that Lygdamus was a favorite and principle attendant of Drusus, beloved by his master for his youth and beauty (*Ann.* 4.10.5). The other sordid circumstances surrounding this event, including the involvement of Tiberius, Tacitus chalks up to mere rumor (*Ann.* 4.11.1 ff.).

¹³ Flor., *Epit.* 2.13.201, Sen., *Suas.* 6.6.14, Sen., *Ep.* 4.7.2, all of which refer to the Egyptian commander Achilles.

It is known that the emperor Claudius was killed by poison. But as Suetonius says, “when and by whom is disputed” (*Claud.* 44.2). Both Suetonius and Tacitus allow that the eunuch Halotus had something to do with it. Tacitus tells us that Halotus, who was responsible for bringing in and tasting the emperor’s food, administered the poison (believed to have been sprinkled on some mushrooms) (*Ann.* 12.66.12). Suetonius too says that many believed Halotus administered the poison to Claudius, but while dining with the priests in the citadel (*Claud.* 44.2.3). Suetonius goes on to say that many believe Agrippina administered the poison herself.

Both of these cases are interesting, because they show that eunuchs held trusted positions in the imperial court, even as early as the Julio-Claudians. Lygdus was one of Drusus’s most trusted attendants, and Halotus was Claudius’s food-taster. These men had easy access to the most important men in Rome. But the fact that they could violate that trust yet again proves that eunuchs were deceitful and ambitious creatures. At least, that is the impression we are left with. However, both of these eunuchs were at the mercy of powerful and cruel people. Sejanus and Agrippina are given full credit for instigating these murders. Would a non-eunuch have been any more willing to stand in the way of such people, virtually guaranteeing their own destruction? Their servile status made them especially vulnerable. And perhaps Halotus and Lygdus *were* deceitful and ambitious. But this was not the direct result of castration; they were surrounded by the deceitful and ambitious, not the least of which were Sejanus and Agrippina themselves.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have seen *spado*, and *castratus*, used in a much broader manner by prose authors. In some cases, these two words do not refer to human beings at all, but rather to plants and animals. But even these occurrences are relative here. It seems to me

that we find *castratus* referring to the deliberate castration of animals, while *spado* is used to represent a plant which is incapable of reproducing, or lacking a reproductive part. This will take on greater significance in the next chapter, where the legal definitions of these two terms relate in a similar way.

We also find the terms *spado* and *castratus* referring to court eunuchs, or attendants/slaves. These were of course the primary occupations of eunuchs. For the average Roman citizen, living in the late Republic or early Empire, a eunuch would have been identified with a household slave, (and seen as an indication of wealth as they were not cheap), or perhaps seen as one of the trappings of state in Eastern courts. By the mid-4th century though, eunuchs held positions of political prominence and had great influence, often acting as intermediaries between the emperor and his subjects. Their rise to power has been relatively well documented by modern sources, and is of particular importance in the study of politics in the late Empire.

Finally, we continued to see that eunuchs were often seen by the Romans as signs of corruptness and immorality. Emperors were ridiculed for their association with such creatures. Eunuchs were often provided as scapegoats for particularly despicable acts, including murder. Much of this stems from the fear and uncertainty men felt when faced with the ambiguous gender role of the eunuch. The fact that most eunuchs were slaves or ex-slaves did not help their cause either. Because people didn't know what to think of these men, they labeled them untrustworthy and deceitful, and of course, the ultimate sign of weakness and effeminacy. This reputation only gained favor by the increasingly large role eunuchs came to play in politics and government. Let us turn now to our fourth and final category: the law.

CHAPTER 4 *SPADONES AND CASTRATI* IN ROMAN LAW

As I stated in Chapter 1, the idea for this thesis arose from a seminar on Roman law. It began out of curiosity concerning Justinian's *Institutes* 1.11.9. In this section concerning adoption, the law states that *spadones* are able to adopt, but not *castrati*. I found this passage confusing, because I had always considered these two terms to be synonymous. In fact, the difference between a eunuch and a *castratus* is not well defined, as seen above. In most cases, they are held to be one and the same. But at times in Justinian's law code, they obviously represent two different types of people. This chapter will therefore attempt to define the basic differences and similarities between *spadones* and *castrati*, as found in Roman law.

Although the *Digest* itself dates to the 6th c. C.E., it is an attempt to codify the decisions and opinions of earlier jurists and emperors. So, while parts of the following section do not hold true in the Classical period, the sentiments which later produced these laws first originated at this time. The laws concerning eunuchs found in the *Digest* are one of our best sources for distinguishing what rights they had in the late Roman period, and thereby we can also estimate their legal standing in earlier time periods. Therefore, it is important to look closely at the various distinctions the *Digest* makes, and to attempt to form some cohesive picture of what a eunuch was in the legal system of the late Roman Empire.

As we have seen, *spado* and *castratus* are both commonly used to denote a eunuch, and in most cases could be interchanged with no discernable difference. The

Digest however, obviously uses these two terms to represent two different types of people. The *Digest* accepts Ulpian's definition from the *Lex Julia et Papia*, book one: "*Spadonum generalis appellatio est: quo nomine tam hi, qui natura spadones sunt, item thlibiae thlasiae, sed et si quod aliud genus spadonum est, continetur*" (50.16.128).

Loosely, the term *spado* consists of those who are either *spadones* by birth, *thlibiae*, *thlasiae*, or any other type of *spado* which exists. This definition is based on the way in which castration occurs. *Thlibiae* refers to those who have been "pressed, squeezed or pinched;" *thlasiae* to those who have been "crushed or bruised." Therefore a *spado*, or eunuch, is one who has been born unable to procreate, or has been made that way by some occurrence short of surgically removing the testicles. Whether the "squeezing" and the "crushing" had to be unintentional or not shall be addressed shortly.

A *castratus* therefore is one who has actually been "cut." Castration usually involved the removal of the testicles only, although occasionally the penis was removed as well. *Digest* 21.1.7 states that a eunuch is considered diseased only if he lacks some necessary part of his body. He is equated with someone who has only one testicle but is still capable of procreation (*Digest* 21.1.6.2). *Digest* 21.1.38.7 asserts that otherwise, a castrated slave is considered to be sound and healthy. Just as castration has no effect on the strength and usefulness of a mule or horse, so it is not a sign of disease in a human being. Although such a horse can no longer procreate, it is still a valuable asset, provided that all parties are aware of its condition. Likewise with eunuch slaves: there is only an action against the seller if he does not disclose the slave's condition to the buyer.

When we think of legal systems today, our first thoughts tend to be of crime and punishment.¹ We forget about civil law – property rights, inheritances and wills, all those little technicalities we leave to lawyers and bureaucrats. But the great majority of Roman law is focused upon such things. And of course, this is the one area where eunuchs are, by nature, different from other men – they cannot procreate. Therefore, special laws regarding marriage, and especially inheritance (and thereby adoption) are necessary.

Such laws make up the bulk of references to *spadones* and *castrati* in the *Digest*, and it is here that we begin to see a bias between the two types of eunuchs. Marriage, children, and inheritances may seem like non-issues for eunuchs. Besides the obvious physical limitations, most eunuchs were slaves of course, and concerns of gender and sexual identity also factor in. But regardless of these things, by the very existence of these laws, we know that eunuchs did marry and adopt, most obviously for the purposes of inheritance.²

Let us look first at marriage. Ulpian, in *Digest* 23.3.39.1 calls into question whether eunuchs could legally marry. He explicitly makes a distinction between *spadones* and *castrati*. He says that there is no action for the dowry against a *castratus*, since there was no dowry in the first place. However, there is an action for dowry against any other *spado*, since marriage can take place in this instance. Also, in *Digest* 40.2.14.1, Marcianus says that while a *spado* is permitted to manumit for the sake of marriage, a

¹ Castration was used as a punishment, first for adulterers (Plaut., *Mil.* 1395-1426; Hor., *Sat.* 1.2.41 ff.; Val. Max., 6.1.13), and later for homosexuals. In the later case, Cantarella argues that such a penalty was in effect before Justinian's codification, perhaps as early as 342 (1992: 184 ff.).

² Cf. Juvenal 1.22, in Chapter 2.

castratus cannot. Therefore, both cases seem to show that while a *spado* could legally marry, a *castratus* could not.

As for the issue of children, the *Digest* addresses this in book one, in the sections concerning adoption. The first instance is an excerpt from Gaius's *Institutes*. It says that those who are not able to procreate, like *spadones*, are able to adopt.³ In 1.7.40.2, an excerpt from Modestinus confirms that a *spado* can indeed adopt for the sake of gaining an heir, and that the defect in his body is not a hindrance. It is important to note that in both cases, the term *spado* is used. Neither section makes any reference to a *castratus*.

The Romans often faced the added difficulty of dealing with a posthumous heir. Obviously this becomes even more difficult when dealing with eunuchs. Valerius Maximus relates an incident which occurred in 77 C.E., in which the eunuch Genucius was denied an inheritance because he had voluntarily castrated himself (7.7.6). The consul ruled that Genucius could be counted neither among men nor women, thereby overturning the earlier ruling of the city praetor.⁴

Book 28.2.6 of the *Digest* addresses the issue of inheritance. Ulpian quotes his own predecessors on the matter. He says that Cassius and Iavolenus wrote that it was possible for someone who has difficulty procreating to take a wife and adopt, and thereby to appoint a posthumous heir. Labeo and Cassius agree that this includes a *spado*, since neither age nor sterility is an impediment to this act. But Julianus says that if he is a *castratus*, he cannot appoint a posthumous heir, and Ulpian confirms that this law is still

³ *Digest* 1.7.2.1 and also Gaius, *Inst.* 1.103.3.

⁴ There is a similar anecdote in the *Vitae sophistarum* of the 2nd-3rd c. writer Philostratus. He tells how a castrated man escaped punishment because the judge declared that he was neither male nor female according to the law. In this case, his ambiguous gender worked to his favor.

in effect. This is in keeping with the previous laws on marriage and adoption. It is interesting to note that Ulpian goes on to say that a hermaphrodite can indeed appoint a posthumous heir, if the male characteristics predominate!

So judging by these laws, it appears that there is a distinct difference between a *spado* and a *castratus*, all of which must depend on the method of and/or the intent to castrate someone. But again, let us put that question aside for a moment. There is one more piece of evidence to look at in the *Digest*. It is a long rescript by the Emperor Hadrian, which appears in book 48.8.4-6. I mentioned earlier that most of the eunuchs in the Roman Empire were slaves. Indeed, the trade of eunuchs seems to have been a very lucrative business. The price of a eunuch was significantly higher than that of an ordinary slave. Most eunuchs would have been barbarians of servile origins, at least until the sixth century.⁵ For example, the Armenian-born Eutherius, a chamberlain of Constantine the Great, had been captured as child and was castrated and sold to Roman merchants (Tougher 1997: 178). The Abagasi were a tribe known for eunuchising the children of their own subjects and then selling them to the Byzantines (*ibid*).

And so the majority of eunuchs came from outside of the empire, and for good reason: castration was forbidden on Roman soil. Domitian was one of the first to pass legislation that no Roman should be turned into a eunuch. He also officially controlled the price of eunuchs who remained in slave-dealers' hands (Suetonius, *Dom.* 7.1.6).

Martial praises Domitian for his legislation against eunuchs, implying that they were

⁵ See Hopkins, 172. Hopkins cites Cedrenus 1.601; Theophanes 1.154; and Procopius, *Gothic Wars*, 8.3.15-17 and 19.

actively involved in adulterous liaisons⁶. However, we know that Domitian himself had a love affair with a eunuch named Earinus, and Cassius Dio says that he forbade castration only to insult the memory of Titus, who also had a fondness for eunuchs (*History*, 67.2.3).⁷

And then we have the rescript of Hadrian. In it, he forbids the making of eunuchs, enforcing severe penalties on those who violate his order (note, he uses the term *spado* here). Anyone who made a eunuch was liable under the *lex Cornelia* (1st century BC) to have his goods confiscated by the imperial treasury. A slave who made a eunuch was subject to the harshest penalty. Also, any doctor who performed the surgery or anyone who offered himself voluntarily for castration was liable to a capital penalty.

Despite such penalties, we know that castration did occur on Roman soil. For instance, Cassius Dio relates the story of the praetorian prefect Plautianus, who castrated one hundred free Roman citizens, of noble birth, so that his daughter would be attended only by eunuchs.⁸ The making of Roman eunuchs must have continued into the reign of Justinian, because he reinforced this prohibition in his *Novellae*, 4.42.2. He states that Romans, whether castrated abroad or on Roman soil, were forbidden to be purchased by another person. But he does allow trafficking in foreign *castrati*, provided that they were emasculated outside of Roman territory.

Going back to Hadrian, it is especially interesting to note that Hadrian forbids the crushing of the testicles, as well as cutting them (*Digest* 48.8.5). This serves to blur the

⁶ *Epigrammata* 6.2. See Chapter 2.

⁷ For more on Domitian and Earinus, see C. Henriksen, "Earinus: An Imperial Eunuch in the Light of the Poems of Martial and Statius," *Mnemosyne* 50 (1997): 281-294.

⁸ Dio, *History*, 76.14.4-6. Dio says this occurred during the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211 AD).

line between the terms *spado* and *castratus*. Hadrian ruled from 117-138 C.E. Does this mean that by 138, the term *castratus* referred to anyone who had been deliberately castrated, as opposed to a *spado* who was made impotent by some accidental circumstance? Most assuredly, at least in legal terminology (the literary sources do not seem to agree). It doesn't seem fair to restrict the legal rights of someone who was cut, but not someone whose testicles were crushed for the express purpose of making a eunuch.

So then the case can be made that it was the *intention* to castrate, rather than the method thereof, which delineated the terms *spado* and *castratus* in the *Digest*. While this was most likely the intent of the lawgivers, that *castrati* should not be allowed to marry or adopt heirs, we know that in reality they did both of these things. Eunuchs in the Late Roman Empire could become enormously wealthy (Hopkins 1978: 178). Hopkins states that the fortune of Narses, Justinian's general, was legendary. It is only natural to attempt some control over the transmission of such wealth, and we know that eunuchs were allowed to make wills (*Codex*, 6.22.5), and that they did occasionally have wives and (adopted) children (Hopkins 1978: 190).⁹

This just goes to show that there are always exceptions to the rules. Eunuchs in particular are a tricky case. For one thing, we are not often told how a particular eunuch was castrated. For instance, Narses would appear to have been castrated many times over: there is speculation of sterile birth, childhood accident, intentional castration by his parents, or having been sold into slavery or captured and then castrated (Fauber 1990:

⁹ Hopkins cites the case of Acolius, A Grand Chamberlain under Valentinian III, who had an adopted son.

14). Without a close examination of a person's anatomy, there is no way to tell whether they were cut or not.

But one thing is clear. In all of these passages, a clear prejudice can be seen between those who have been made impotent by birth or nature (*spadones*), and those who have been made so on purpose (*castrati*). Castration was deemed unacceptable and the practice was restricted with harsh penalties for any infractions. But eunuchs did exist within the empire, and so their existence is reflected in the law code. Even in looking solely at the law, we get an idea of society's attitude toward eunuchs. They were seen as inferior creatures, who were usually to be regarded with scorn and contempt. But the literature from this period also reflects the fact that eunuchs filled a variety of important and necessary roles. Even Justinian, who legislated against them, had several eunuchs in trusted positions at his court. In many ways, it seems that eunuchs were regarded as what we might term a "necessary evil."

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In many ways, this paper raises far more questions than it answers. Even the attempt to obtain an unequivocal definition for *spado* has proven to be a bit naïve. As it turns out, there is no one definition that fits all circumstances, and modern translators are right to interpret the generic “eunuch” unless the context makes a more specific word apparent. The ancient authors themselves seem to disagree at times over what sort of eunuch *spado* represents.

By and large, *spado* means a castrated man, regardless of the method of castration. This is especially true in poetry, where Juvenal explicitly uses *spado* for a man who has been surgically castrated. In prose too, it would seem that *spado* represents an intentionally castrated man, usually a slave, when referring to human beings. The one exception comes in the *Digest*, where *spado* is used for a man that has been born impotent or accidentally castrated. So we know that the definition was flexible, and changed with time and according to circumstance.

Castratus was not nearly as frequent as *spado*, at least when speaking of men. It was more often used to describe animals or plants. However, *castratus* always refers to an individual who has been castrated intentionally, especially in the case of the *Digest*.

As we have seen, most of the writing concerning eunuchs is vituperative, and we get the general impression that the ancient Romans were unsure of them, and fearful as a result. I have used the word ambiguous to describe them on several occasions. This word is apt in several ways. First and foremost, their gender was ambiguous. They were

neither man nor woman. And to the average Roman citizen, for whom “manliness” was the greatest virtue, castration was the ultimate sign of effeminacy and weakness. As a result, they were portrayed as sexually depraved, libidinous, sneaky and deceitful. Their rise to political prominence only escalated such sentiment. However, the fact that they did hold such important and trusted positions tells us that they were highly competent and valued by many of those around them. In many ways, their “ambiguous” gender afforded them unique opportunities to gain access to and to exert influence on the most powerful people in the land.

Spado and *castratus* are only two of about ten words meaning eunuch in Latin; their Greek counterparts are even more numerous. But surprisingly enough, this brief survey is remarkably indicative of the attitudes toward eunuchs throughout antiquity. But there is still much to be discovered. One can only hope that as the realm of gender studies continues to progress outside the bounds of conventionality, scholars will continue to pursue the study of eunuchs in the ancient world.

APPENDIX A
SEARCH RESULTS FOR *SPADO*

Author	Work	Total Number of Occurrences
L. Iunius Moderatus Columella	<i>Rust.</i> 3.10.15.2	1
Q. Curtius Rufus	3.3.23.2, 3.12.5.1, 3.12.17.3, 4.10.18.1, 4.10.25.1, 4.10.34.3, 5.1.6.4, 5.2.14.1, 5.11.4.2, 5.12.9.6, 5.12.12.1, 5.12.15.4, 6.5.23.2, 6.6.8.3, 10.1.25.3, 10.1.27.1, 10.1.33.1, 10.1.37.3	18
Annius Florus	2.13.201	1
Gaius, iur.	<i>Inst.</i> 1.103.3, 1.196.6 <i>Epit.</i> 1.5.3.1	3
Horace	<i>Epod.</i> 9.13	1
Justinian	<i>Digest</i> 1.7.2, 1.7.40, 21.1.6, 21.1.7, 21.1.38, 23.3.39, 27.1.15, 28.2.6, 39.4.16, 40.2.14, 48.8.4 (2) 50.16.128 (3)	15
Juvenal	1.22, 6.376, 14.91	3
Livy	9.17.16.2, 35.15.4.3	2
Martial	2.54.4, 5.41.1, 6.2.5, 6.2.6, 6.39.21, 10.52.1, 11.75.6, 11.81.1	8
Petronius	<i>Sat.</i> 27.3.2, 27.5.3, 55.6.4	3
Pliny the Elder	<i>HN</i> 7.129.6, 11.131.2, 11.263.7, 12.12.4, 13.38.8, 13.41.4, 15.51.7, 15.130.6, 16.169.11, 24.72.7, 28.65.2, 36.89.2	12

Priapea	Work 001, 15.3	1
Quintilian	<i>Inst.</i> 5.12.19.1, 6.3.64.8, 11.3.19.4	3
Seneca the Younger	<i>Ben.</i> 5.16.6.8 <i>Ep.</i> 4.7.2, 114.6.10	3
Seneca the Elder	<i>Suas.</i> 6.6.14	1
Suetonius	<i>Claud.</i> 28.1.1, 44.2.3 <i>Tit.</i> 7.1.4 <i>Dom.</i> 7.1.6	4
Tacitus	<i>Hist.</i> 2.71.3, 3.40.2 <i>Ann.</i> 4.8.3, 4.10.5, 12.66.12, 14.59.10	6
Valerius Maximus	9.2(ext).3.8	1

Total number of occurrences: 86*

* N.B. Five occurrences from Pomponius Porphyrio and four from the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* are not included, because they date later than the 2nd c. C.E.

APPENDIX B
SEARCH RESULTS FOR *CASTRATUS*

Author	Work	Total Number of Occurrences
Aulus Cornelius Celsus	<i>Med.</i> 1.5.1.3	1
Q. Curtius Rufus	6.3.12.3, 10.1.37.6	2
Justinian	<i>Digest</i> 21.1.38 (4), 23.3.39 (3), 28.2.6, 37.14.6, 40.2.14	10
Pliny the Elder	<i>HN</i> 11.230.4, 11.270.1	2
Seneca the Elder	<i>Controv.</i> 10.4.17.12	1
Seneca the Younger	<i>Dial.</i> 3.21.3.2	1

Total number of occurrences: 18*

* N.B. These are the occurrences that use the perfect passive participle or the substantive adjective *castratus* to refer to a man as a eunuch, with the exception of four instances found in the *Digest* (21.1.38 ff.) which refer to castrated animals.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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