

Trans & Gender Identity in the Premodern Mediterranean

This paper explores the intersection and imbrication of transness and Mediterraneanness in the premodern period. How did Mediterranean mobility, spaces, and creativity inform and make possible the “transing” of gender? Reexamining previously considered sources with the benefit of recent scholarship on archival silences and trans history, we suggest that migration and race shaped possibilities for transgender people. Building on the work of Roland Betancourt, Jen Manion, C. Riley Snorton, Marisa Fuentes, and Saidiya Hartmann, we employ their strategies in an attempt to recover the lives and experiences of people who are most often left out of the historical record, or to examine those who enter the record only as objects of a punitive criminal justice system that purposely distorts their experience. Prioritizing the agency of people who lived non-binary and translives, we strive to make them legible to a contemporary audience while refraining from imposing our own labels upon them. We embrace the messy and contradictory lives of our subjects as a way of showing the complexity of personhood and identity. We also consider the unrecorded suffering and reflect on how the physical bodies of those punished for transgressing gender norms were inscribed with meaning that resonated with hegemonic constructions of sexuality and identity. At the same time, we are careful not to center the elite male discourses of a heteronormative society but seek to place the bodies, identities, and experiences of trans people at the center, not at the margins. This paper is co-authored.