

Intersex Antiquity:  
Historical Intersex People and their Families in Ancient Rome

In section 7.36 of his *Natural Histories*, Pliny the Elder states, “The transformation of females into males is not a myth” (*ex feminis mutari in mares non est fabulosum*). After citing attestations of three separate individuals who transitioned “from a girl” (*ex virgine*) to a “boy” (*puer*) in Casinum, Argos, and Smyrna, Pliny writes, “I myself saw in Africa a person who had turned into a male on the day of marriage to a husband; this was Lucius Constitius, a citizen of Thysdritum” (*ipse in Africa vidi mutatum in marem nuptiarum die L. Constitium civem Thysdritanum*). Though Latin typically uses the words *androgynus* and *hermaphroditus*, the modern term ‘intersex’ designates a person born with sex traits and/or reproductive anatomy that resists neat categorization as either ‘male’ or ‘female.’ While some intersex people express differences in sex characteristics at birth, others do not show these sex traits until puberty or even later (see InterACT). Pliny’s account of these four individuals attests to the existence of intersex people in ancient Rome (Brisson 2002; Gracht 2012; Gevaert and Laes 2013; Graumann 2013; Shannon-Henderson 2020). Yet by stating that Lucius Constitius and others were about to be married, Pliny also shows that intersex people were part of a broader community that included natal family members, spouses, and fellow citizens.

Pliny’s descriptions of people who change sex complement other Roman records of historical people who may have been intersex, but many of these ancient attestations focus on scenes of violence. They include the following: the birth of intersex infants as omens (*prodigia*, Diodorus 4.6.5 and Deriu 2021; Livy 24.10.10–13, 27.11.4–5; Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.64); the use of intersex children as “pet slaves” (*deliciae*, Pliny, *Nat.* 7.34); medical marvels involving the bodies of intersex adults (Diodorus 32.10.2–9, 32.11.1–4; Phlegon, *Mir.* 6 and Doroszewska 2013); and the murder of intersex adults (Diodorus 32.12.1–2).

Rather than focusing on violence, the presence and absence of genitals, or mythological tales (e.g., Hermaphroditus in Ovid, *Met.* 4.274–388, see Zajko 2009), I recontextualize these

stories to argue that historical intersex people were not as socially isolated as our sources suggest. Rather, they lived to adulthood and were part of a community of family members. Using Pliny *Nat.* 7.36 and Phlegon *Mir.* 6–9 as my examples, I structure this paper in four parts. First, I show that historical intersex people in Rome survived infancy and lived with their natal families, including parents who may have known that their child was intersex (on accommodating disabled infants, see Sneed 2021). Second, I demonstrate that though puberty and marriage were particularly challenging times in a young intersex person’s life, these individuals married and lived with spouses. Third, I highlight that intersex people continued to be part of their social communities after their perceived sex change. Finally, I conclude with the story of Iphis, a mythological figure who transitions from female to male on their marriage day (Ovid, *Met.* 9.666–797), to hypothesize that some intersex people living in ancient Rome may have navigated similar familial and social dynamics.

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