I have always felt uncomfortable when approaching the problem of engendering the past. While it has for a long time been clear that the vast majority of literature dealing with social organization and practice in both the past and the present has been androcentric in its basic assumptions, the mechanisms and strategies necessary to redress this bias have not been at all obvious. An easy first step has been to familiarize oneself with ‘women’s history’, but women’s history is not the same thing as an engendered past and the risk is of falling into the ‘women and other minorities’ trope, in which women are considered as non-standard members of society alongside categories such as priests, immigrants and soldiers. It was not until relatively recently, as I became increasingly interested in medieval and ancient slavery, that I began to feel that there might be ways in which gender could be approached.

The dichotomy between slavery and freedom is, in some respects, analogous to that between male and female. In both relationships there appears to be a rigid division between the two categories and yet any observation of social practice in specific historical contexts shows that the ‘rules’ of society are constantly subverted. Thus in a slave-owning patriarchal society such as Republican Rome, in which all power is formally invested in free adult males, the slave and the wife of a powerful man may yet wield more influence in both the private and public spheres than the poorer free men; a reality running contrary to the dominant perception of the structuring of society. Slavery, like gender, creates invisible people. Frequently ignored by both ancient and modern commentators or marginalized unconsciously in the analytical literature, vast numbers of people, often the majority of any given community, disappear from sight. The literature is full of illustrations or discussions of the typical Roman or the typical Ancient Briton or the typical Anglo-Saxon which show him (sic) as a free man. The typical adult in all these societies was almost certainly a female slave. This is not to say that female slaves formed the majority group in Iron Age societies but they were probably the largest of the four categories of adults: free women, free men, unfree women, unfree men.

What I should like to do here is to sketch an impressionistic outline of household relationships based on my reading of early medieval literature and draw out, on the one hand, the similarities I see in the conditions of wives and slaves and on the other the blurred distinction between slaves and free folk in day
to day practice. I shall then go on to discuss briefly whether such a society can be identified in the archaeological record and what light, if any, the material evidence might shed upon it.

To understand ‘Barbarian Society’ it is important to recognize that the most important unit of social reproduction was the household and that all economic activity was aimed, ultimately, at maintaining and reproducing the household. The typical member of society whom we meet in the literature is the primary male in such a household. Since Ancient Europe seems to have been comprised primarily of agnatic viripatri-local populations the identity of the household is frequently linked to the identity of the primary male, a truth borne out by even a cursory familiarity with toponymy. Barbarian societies practised mixed agriculture in which stock raising and cereal production predominated. As well as the agrarian chores necessary to maintain this subsistence regime other tasks such as cloth-making, metalworking, potting and so forth took place. Although it is unlikely that many farms were totally self sufficient, the percentage of the primary produce expended on goods bought in from outside was minimal. While excess land might have been rented out it is unlikely that many, if any, households subsisted upon the revenue from rents alone. It is this characteristic which principally distinguishes ‘Barbarian Society’ from the civilized societies of the Mediterranean, and from the feudal societies of the central and later Middle Ages.

Nineteenth-century visions of primitive democracy at work in Barbarian Society, including Marx’s ‘Germanic Mode of Production’ (Hill 1990), were at fault in their patriarchal assumptions. Identifying the barbarian household with the householder (as we can conveniently label the primary male), the bourgeois Victorian proto-historians created an image of egalitarianism which subsequent generations of scholars have rejected. At its core, however, there was a level of accuracy in the nineteenth-century model. While it is clearly unacceptable to characterize a whole society with reference to the one member of each household alone, there was some truth in the notion that all the individuals within this category shared similar values and aspirations. The actual status of individual householders, relative to one another, would vary according to the size of their land holdings and their efficiency as social strategists and this in turn would be reflected in the size of their households.

Within each household we can infer from what little direct evidence we have, and also from ethnographic and historical analogs, that the division of labour was organized along lines of gender and age. Certain chores were regarded as lying within the female sphere and others within the male and within these two divisions tasks were divided once again as being suitable for the mature and the immature. Thus, for example, ploughing was a male preserve, the plough being guided by an adult while the oxen were led by a boy (Swanton 1975: 108).

The size of the household would vary according to the amount of land available but given the nature of the division of labour certain ratios of gender and age should remain broadly constant. ‘Family planning’, then, may well have been one of the householder’s primary concerns. The poorest of households would not have been able to maintain such a rigid division of labour and their
already tenuous position in society at large may well have been worsened through stigma associated with cross-labouring. Clearly even among better-off households the need to maintain a constant age and gender ratio, despite the ageing and mortality of its members, must have called for active measures to be taken.

In the British Isles in the early Middle Ages the optimum ages recommended for first marriage were the mid-twenties for a man and the mid-teens for a woman. In actuality many men may not have married until later as, unless well connected, they will have had to wait until their father died or retired before they could enter into land-holding and house-holding themselves (Charles-Edwards 1993: 175–81). Clearly at this age the couple are in their prime and would be able to supply many of the labour needs of the household themselves but it will be some time before their own children will be able to help them. A number of strategies were available to make up this labour shortfall; slavery, concubinage, fosterage and hired labour. A word should be said first about hired labour. Concepts of wages were unknown in barbarian societies, which were largely without money or with only a partially monetarized economy. In early medieval Europe labourers of either sex were taken on at certain regular dates in the year and undertook to join the household for a specific period of time, usually a full year. During that time they were not paid but lived with the household as one of the family. At the time that their term of service expired they might receive a gift from the householder the value of which would reflect his assessment of the individual concerned (Miller 1990: 120–2). Fosterlings were in much the same situation except that as minors the contract would be settled between the fosterer and the natural parents, again with an exchange of gifts, and the period of fosterage was usually several years (Charles-Edwards 1993: 78–82, 311–12; Miller 1990: 122–4).

Concubinage and slavery were somewhat different. Fosterlings and hirelings were frequently kinsfolk or the offspring of near neighbours and their residence in the household was generally of a relatively short duration. For them it was a transitional period between leaving the parental home and setting up house on their own. Wives and slaves, at least in theory, were permanent additions to the household, and they were rarely, if ever, close kin. Polygyny of one sort or another was fairly common in Barbarian Europe, unfortunately our assumptions about it have been coloured by modern perceptions of the seraglio, or of Koranic insistence of the equality of wives, just as our images of slavery have been unduly informed by our familiarity with the latifundia of the ante-bellum South. In early Irish law it is quite clear that there were different grades of wife and that any householder would have a primary wife who was lady of the house, and such distinctions were probably to be found elsewhere (Kelly 1988: 70). Indeed, were we to attempt to create objective distinctions between certain forms of polygyny, concubinage and the simple abuse of female slaves and hirelings we should probably fail, but this is not to say that in any specific social setting it would be unclear when such lines had been crossed.

Slaves in Barbarian Society were almost invariably foreigners. This is one of the fundamental features of the slave trade which has often eluded those who
attempt economic reconstruction, who have sought a gradient of exchange and
tried to distinguish slave producing from slave consuming regions. As the early
plantation owners in America discovered, natives make poor slaves. They are
familiar with the region and with the ecosystem, they have friends and kin within
reach and they speak the language and know the customs of the land. Wherever
enslavement originally takes place, the slave will be most pliable where she or he
is an alien. The Latin word servus, a slave, derives from the verb servare meaning
to ‘save’ or ‘protect’ and this etymology is not merely euphemistic. Household
slavery of the sort we are interested in here (for the idea of vast latifundia with
their separate slave quarters is alien to Barbarian Society) operated through a
social contract between the householder and the slave. The new slave had no kin
or friends in the district and would probably have had difficulty with the local
language. As such she, or he, was an outlaw with no one to stand surety for her,
and was also most probably very young and without much experience of the
world. Her, or his, position in the household was much like that of the fosterling
and hireling. She, or he, received free board and lodging in return for fulfilling
the chores allocated by the master. Without wishing to present slave owning as
a philanthropic activity, it should be clear that once the slave had arrived in her
new home the household offered more security to her than any of the other
available options.

The proposition which I would like to present now is that, in Barbarian
Society, marriage and slavery were conditions analogous to childhood. In these,
mixed agrarian, rural communities the household was the basic unit of social
reproduction. Successful households maintained and reproduced themselves,
sometimes several-fold. They did this by recruiting new members to fulfil
essential social and economic roles. We have reviewed briefly a number of the
ways such recruitment can take place but have so far ignored that method of
recruitment which was regarded as most normal by ancient writers; biological
reproduction. The Barbarian world was a high mortality/high fertility society
with an easy come, easy go attitude to babies. Philippe Ariès (1965) has argued
that children were not loved before the seventeenth century and, while this
extreme view is probably not tenable (Arnold 1980), it is acceptable to assume
that couples were resigned to the fact that many of their children would not
survive infancy. As the child grew and thrived it would earn for itself a place in
the affections of those who cared for it. While a death in the first year of life might
be regarded as a regrettable but unavoidable turn of events, a death in the fifth
year, when the ‘creature’ had had time to develop a distinct personality, and
become a person, would have been a tragedy.

I would like to float the proposal that in the household, which represented a
microcosm of the universe to its inhabitants, wives and slaves, entering from
outside the community of the kin, underwent a similar process to children.
Entering the community without a social identity and unfamiliar with the rules of
the house, their happiness and personal security were at a very low premium. As
the years dragged by, those who survived would gradually build a society around
themselves in which they had particular friends among their cohabitants and
neighbours and an increasing wealth of shared experiences with all those around
them. The majority of the households in northern Europe in the period from 1000 BC to AD 1000 lived in one or two room buildings and excessive familiarity with individuals of all classifications would have been unavoidable. The biological children of the primary male would also play a major role in socializing their carers since wives and slaves would have had a large role in their upbringing and education. As their wards achieved maturity, and attained more significant roles within the household and the community at large, the status of the carers is also likely to have been enhanced, a state of affairs that can be visibly observed whenever the literature is available; the matriarch and the aged nurse are stock figures the world over. Nor need such characters be so advanced in age. When her eldest daughter married the mother might still be in her early thirties, and the child minder a few years younger.

The image of a society I have conjured here is based largely on a variety of diverse documentary and literary evidence ranging from Anglo-Saxon, Welsh and Irish law codes to Icelandic sagas and Tacitus' *Germania*. Archaeology has so far contributed little to the construct save the physical description of the house itself, but this is not negligible. Despite the differences of ascribed status, all the kinds of people we have considered were living in very close proximity, eating sleeping and working together. The age constraints on labour division will have entailed the free man carrying out tasks at one point in the house's history which a slave may have performed at another and similarly mistress and maid will have taken their turns at the butter churn. One of the failings of our politically correct society has been to idealistically place love and abuse at opposite ends of some kind of behavioural spectrum when an understanding of the world based on observation might suggest something quite different. A level of identification of interest between members of such a closely integrated community, whatever their ascribed status, must have been unavoidable.

But all of this is a fantasy. Some rather dubious and far from unequivocal medieval documents have been used to construct a generalized vision of Barbarian Society, a Long Iron Age. Where is the beef? We were asked to look at invisible people, so is it any surprise that there is no evidence for their existence? The concept of invisibility in fiction and film is fatally flawed. It is easy to imagine how one could invent something that could not be seen and that could be used to make a garment to cover the entire human body. The visual image is merely the result of light being reflected from the surfaces in the field of vision onto the retina of the observer, if we could create a surface that was completely non-reflecting then we would not be able to see it. The flaw however, which is always ignored in fiction and film, is that however invisible a person or object might be it would not create light conditions that would allow us to see through them. This is how black holes were identified by astrophysicists, they cannot be seen but stars and other heavenly bodies disappear when they pass behind them. In this fashion we should be able to locate invisible people in the past by identifying the negative evidence for their existence.

What we are looking for is evidence for a period of greater economic independence of individual households, and for distinctions of status existing within the household but being disarticulated from labour specialization. The
large one-roomed Iron Age house standing alone, or with only one or two other similar structures within a demarcated enclosure, is the central feature of this social formation. The lack of internal divisions within the house may well point to the integrated nature of the community within. Other features which may mark the emergence of this kind of society in the last couple of centuries of the Bronze Age are the relative decline in monumentality and the increased investment in weaponry and armour. Both these phenomena may be linked to a relative rise in slavery. In societies in which slavery is less important and households are largely made up solely of the biological family of the householder there is, necessarily, a greater dependence upon the co-operative labour of other households. At the end of our period this can be identified in the appearance of nucleated villages at precisely the period when we know that slavery is becoming less common. Although the day to day workings of labour organization in the Neolithic and the early to mid-Bronze Age are unknown, current trends in interpreting the awesome monumentality of these periods stress the rôle monument construction played in reinforcing communal relations over a relatively wide area (Parker-Pearson 1993). The increase in weaponry in the archaeological record of the Long Iron Age might also be explained with reference to slavery. We need not interpret the increased incidence of arms in the record as necessarily indicating an increased incidence of violence for what we are seeing are the results of structured deposition. What has happened is that weapons have become important signifiers and this must indicate that there is a status division between the man with weapons and the man without.

From another perspective we have a period of relatively stable population density in the Long Iron Age (the transitory aberration of the Roman intervention in some areas excepted) when compared to the population explosions of the Neolithic and Feudal Ages. This may be linked to the micro-demography which we have been examining. Our Barbarian households are, by and large, quite substantial establishments in which the reproductive biological family of the householders are in the minority. In the nucleated villages of the Feudal era, and perhaps in the communities of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, most households are comprised almost entirely of the biological family of the householder. This means that in such societies a far higher proportion of the labour force is involved in biological reproduction.

A third perspective is that of unstructured deposition. In much of the north of Europe over the period I have designated the Long Iron Age there is a general paucity of finds. Recent work, such as that of J.D. Hill (e.g. 1990), has argued that much of what we do find from Iron Age-occupation sites is the result of structured deposition; the deliberate laying down of materials in some specific and conscious ritual practice. Such theses argue that the apparent absence of material from some regions does not necessarily indicate relatively poor economic conditions but merely differing traditions of deposition. This leaves us with the altogether different question; why was there so little unstructured deposition (dumping) in the Iron Age and Early Medieval periods? Above I have argued that Barbarian Society is characterized by a very high degree of self-sufficiency as a result of labour concentration in individual households. Under
such conditions it could be argued that not only production but also consumption were fully socialized and that, like wives and slaves, artefacts were also part of the family. If this were the case then non-utilitarian or less than fully efficient objects might be retained far longer than in a market oriented society. Their eventual deposition, like that of the human members of the community, might be more likely to be structured.²

So this contribution comes to an end. What has it added to the debate? Perhaps only one idea, and that not revolutionary. That the household is a kingdom of itself and that none can enter into it unless they be born again.

Notes
1. For the purposes of this chapter I shall adopt the concept of the Long Iron Age as short hand for the kind of societies that seem to have dominated northern Europe between about 1000 BC and AD 1000. This classification includes the last few generations of the Bronze Age and the Roman period away from the Mediterranean. I will also sometimes use the phrase ‘Barbarian Society’ with reference to the social formations covered in this definition.
2. I have been told that a similar theory has been published by a Hungarian archaeologist in German but have so far been unable to track this work down.

References