

Julia Kelto Lillis: *Virgin Territory. Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press 2022 (Christianity in Late Antiquity 13). XVI, 273 p. \$ 95.00/£ 80.00. ISBN: 978-0-520-38901-4.

Virginity occupied a central place in Christian Late Antiquity. As late antique historians have shown, it was a potent symbol and a contested one; it reflected shifting gender and sexual ideologies and social configurations, as well as informed theological debates and was wielded in polemics and political wrangling.¹ Female virginity, especially, solicited the interest of a host of Christian writers who attempted to promote it, control its meaning, and to instrumentalize it to various ends. But what, precisely, did female virginity entail? Is it something one acquires? Is it a marker of status? Is it a metaphor? Is it a disposition of the body or soul, or both? Does it point to a particular physiological condition; if so, what? With deft precision, Julia Kelto Lillis argues that historians have too readily assumed virginity to be a stable concept and configured anatomically as hymenal. Instead, she treats early Christian discourses of virginity as a set of conceptual “maps,”² (p. 17) ones that she traces impressively across Greek, Latin, and Syriac sources. “*Virgin Territory*” demonstrates that female virginity remained “flexible and semantically multiple,” (p. 20) even as Christians increasingly understood it to be “physically perceptible” (p. 19) on the body. In this, Lillis offers a sophisticated study that enhances historians’ sensitivity to an intellectual history of virginity – a concept that continues to solicit attention and fear across cultures and contexts today (see pp. 5–11).

Lillis’ initial chapter draws together medical and other Greek and Roman literature with early Christian and Jewish sources to highlight that virginity was conceived differently across these sources and shifted over the centuries (“Testing, Showing, and Perceiving Virginity in Antiquity,” pp. 23–57). Sexual encounters and childbearing could be registered on the body, but the locus of that change was not tied to exclusively, or commonly, to a “hymenal barrier” (pp. 190, 196). Sources reveal multiple ways to discern and establish

1 There are numerous studies notably by Peter Brown, David Hunter, Susanna Elm, Elisabeth Clark, Elisabeth Castelli, and Virginia Burrus, among others.

2 Kelto Lillis draws on J. Z. Smith: *Map is not Territory. Studies in the History of Religions*. Leiden 1978 (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 23).

virginity, including comportment and behavior, but into the fourth through seventh centuries we find a reliance on anatomical signs. Chapter two turns to shifting early Christian understandings of Mary's virginity ("Mary's Forms of Virginity in Early Christian Writings," pp. 58–94). Here Lillis shows that the test of Mary's virginal birth in the *Protoevangelium of James* does not prove Mary's hymenal intactness – startling precisely this is how Salome's actions have been generally understood by scholars³ – rather, it declares Mary to have been spared the vagaries of "ordinary childbirth" (p. 63). Tertullian's treatise *On the Flesh of Christ* proves an early outlier promoting an "anatomical closure" (p. 72) as the marker of virginity, while writers like Origen conceived virginity as sexual experience, as was more common in earlier centuries. By the fifth century anatomical conceptions of virginity dominated and would be central to Christian articulations of Mary's perpetual virginity.

The following two chapters consider the writings of major fourth century thinkers from across the empire ("Virginity of Body and Soul. Fourth-Century Christian Configurations," pp. 97–135; "Sealed Fountains. The Imagery of Fourth-Century Christian Virginity Discourse," pp. 136–161): Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem of Nisibis, and Ambrose of Milan. Lillis meticulously identifies important distinctions in writers who could be too easily treated together as promoters of asceticism. They all understand virginity to be a product of soul and mind and something that a woman both earns and receives from God. Yet where Ephrem, Basil, and Ambrose worry over threats to a woman's virginity, Gregory holds out virginity as spiritual practice, a route "to regain incorruptibility," a mode of life not only for women (p.109 and pp. 121–122). These authors draw on the same well of biblical imagery, from the prophets and Song of Songs: waters, fountains, and seals. Female virginity provides a site to work out Christological assertions, ascetic controversies, and establish group boundaries.

Chapters four and five ("Perceptible Virginity. Its Usefulness and Consequences," pp. 165–196) consider the implications of the fourth century "perceptibility turn." This conception, she argues, would lead to greater surveillance of women's bodies in the slave and sex trade as well as in ascetic living.

3 E.g., J. Schaberg: *The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth (Proto-James and Pseudo-Matthew)*. In E. Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.): *Searching the Scriptures. Vol. 2: A Feminist Commentary*. New York 1994, pp. 708–727, pp. 716–717; see also Kelto Lillis' article: *Paradox in Partu: Verifying Virginity in the Protoevangelium of James*. In: *J ECS* 24, 2016, pp. 1–28.

The move toward anatomical understandings of sexuality coincided with Christological debates over Christ's nature and Mary's status as a "God bearer." (p. 184) Anatomical accounts of virginity could concretize claims about her virginal status. Moreover, such a view of virginity enabled figures like Ambrose to draw analogies between the "sealed" bodies of female virgins and the closed border of an emerging orthodox church. The final chapter addresses Augustine's views on whether virginity is retained should a virgin be sexually violated ("Augustine of Hippo and the Problem of Double Integrity," pp. 197–216). In the *City of God*, Augustine holds that a raped woman remains chaste because this state refers to a disposition, yet she does not remain a virgin. In this, Augustine echoes the emphasis on anatomical virginity that gained ascendancy in Late Antiquity. For virgins themselves, Lillis speculates, the consequence of this physiological view of virginity likely made them more vulnerable to surveillance, and their status "in their church and community" more precarious (p.213), even as it gave them a potential means to demonstrate their virginal state medically.

Ultimately, "Virgin Territory" shows that while anatomical virginity came to dominate Christian thinking in the fourth and later centuries, there was no singular understanding of how it registered on the bodies and genitalia of virginal women (p. 222). Lillis provides robust evidence of the conflicted, overlapping, and shifting virginity discourse in antiquity, and cautions historians to examine sources with sensitivity to virginity's definitional instability, and so too, its symbolic potency. "Virgin Territory" may miss an opportunity, though, to elaborate more on its own title. Namely, did late antique virginity discourse reflect imperialist and colonializing agendas (p. 18)? As Lillis helpfully notes, the "perceptibility turn" coincides with dramatic and unsettling geo-political shifts, changing borders, and the dislocations of populations (p. 191). How are Christian investments in concretized understandings of virginal bodies entangled in imperializing logics, attempts to fix ethnic and regional borders, along with ecclesial ones?⁴ Overall, "Virgin Terri-

4 I am informed by M. Kotrosits' recent article: The Ethnography of Gender: Reconsidering Gender as an Object of Study. In: *Studies in LateAntiquity* 7, 2023, pp. 5–28. There may be overlapping interests in asserting an observable virginity and queries about Christ's circumcised body that also surface in Late Antiquity. Andrew Jacobs has argued that the later was animated by Roman specular logic and production of populations; he concludes, though, that Christian fascination with the circumcision did not have a stabilizing effect, but rather installed difference within Christian identity; see A. S. Jacobs: *Christ Circumcised. A Study in Early Christian*

tory” is an adept and thorough study, making a vital contribution to late antique studies and the historical studies of sexuality and genders more broadly. Lillis contributes significantly to the enduring fascination with female virginity in Christian Late Antiquity, and beyond.

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Carly Daniel-Hughes, Concordia University, Montreal
Professor of Religions and Cultures
carly.danielhughes@concordia.ca

www.plekos.de

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