

Consecrated Virgins as Living Reliquaries in Late Antiquity

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Abstract

This article discusses the ways in which the physical presence of consecrated virgins was perceived, described, and subsequently altered in Late Antiquity. In the course of the fourth and fifth centuries CE, through codes that regulated their behaviour and outward appearance, and through the assignment of specific ritual functions and spaces, bishops constructed a new and long-lasting image of consecrated virgins. The resulting model, the authors argue, was shaped by notions regarding female anatomy as well as by their association with the Virgin Mary; it was similar to a precious reliquary: a container whose aesthetic indicated the consecrated nature of its interior.

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Christian deportment and the 'making' of Christian virgins

[1] As Roman society and Christianity met and merged in the wake of the edict of 313 CE, the 'look' of Christians, and in particular of specialised categories within and adjacent to the clergy, was reworked to reflect a new "visual rhetoric of sanctity".¹ Among these specialised categories consecrated virgins occupied a privileged position. Both as identified individuals and as groups, consecrated virgins are a constant presence in written sources from Late Antiquity. Despite local traditions and variations as well as differences in interpretation between individual authors, it is evident that virgins, and above all consecrated virgins, achieved an almost unsurpassed status within Christian hierarchies of individual sanctity.² Regulated in minute detail already in the third century, the deportment,

¹ Phrase coined by Cynthia Hahn, "Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints' Shrines", in: *Speculum* 72 (1997), no. 4, 1079-1106: 1079. On the adoption of the imperial aesthetic of power and sanctity, see e.g. Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, UK 1998.

² The most important contributions in the still growing bibliography on Late Antique virgins are: Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York 1988; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism*

'look', and symbolism of these virgins of the Church were altered during the fourth century through a change of imagery, as Christian authors favoured certain analogies over others in describing them.³ This discursive construction promoted the consecrated virgin as an intermediate being, alike to martyrs and angels. After sketching the context of consecrated virginity, we attempt to identify the specific modes in which the virgins' sanctity was expressed, some of which present intriguing analogies with rich reliquary containers that appeared in the same period. By making use of both written and iconographic evidence, we attempt to reconstruct the 'look' of consecrated virgins and, with it, their particular function within Christian communities.

Consecrated virginity

[2] Female Christian asceticism developed in the tension between, on the one hand, the Desert Fathers' ideals, mediated by popular accounts about Saint Anthony and his peers, and, on the other, conservative gender norms of the Roman urban elite. The consecrated virgin who dedicated her (and in a remarkably few cases *his*) virginity to Christ attained a seemingly unsurpassed status in Christian communities, being a main concern of bishops and other prominent figures.⁴ From the second to the fourth century, a remarkable quantity of letters, sermons, and treatises were dedicated to all aspects of virginal life, from pedagogical advice and admonitions, to exhortations and legal regulations, in a mainly episcopal effort to define, praise, and control the status of the

in Late Antiquity, Oxford 1994; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, London 1996; Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh. Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis 1998; Sissel Undheim, *Borderline Virginites. Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity*, London 2018.

³ While the appearance of women was already a matter of concern for Paul as well as the author of *1 Peter*, the look of virgins became regulated with increasing detail during the third century, when several authors dedicated space to the theme. Most noteworthy are the works of Tertullian (*De virginibus velandis*) and Cyprian (*De habitu virginum*), both from third-century Carthage. See Teresa M. Shaw, "Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), no. 3, 485-499; Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Veils, Virgins, and the Tongues of Men and Angels. Women's Heads in Early Christianity", in: *Off with her head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*, eds. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, Berkeley 1995, 131-164; Carly Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage: Dressing for the Resurrection*, New York 2011. For an art historical approach of the process, see Ivan Foletti, "Des femmes à l'autel? Jamais! Les diaconesses (veuves et prêtresses) et l'iconographie de la Théotokos", in: *Féminité et masculinité altérées: transgression et inversion des genres au Moyen Age*, eds. Eva Pibiri and Fanny Abbott, Florence 2017, 51-92.

⁴ For a discussion of the formality and ritual practice of this vow, see René Metz, *La consecration des vierges dans l'église Romaine: Étude d'histoire de la liturgie*, Paris 1954; id., *La consécration des vierges: Hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, Paris 2001; Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 11-15.

consecrated virgin.⁵ In the context of the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth century, as has been pointed out by many scholars, the sacred virgins came to serve as embodiments of contemporary theological debates; as physical sites on which discourses of Christology and salvation were inscribed. Their holiness was created discursively through biblical references that overlapped various symbolic layers.⁶ Largely a male rhetorical construction, the virgin's body reflected contemporary notions of holy life, shaped by underlying assumptions regarding female gender and physiology.⁷ As an ideal image of the virgin crystallised, the confines and functions of consecrated virginity were established. A consecration ritual was introduced, specific ritual tasks were ascribed, and, we argue, specific ideals of what sacred virginity 'looked like' were increasingly promoted. At the intersection of the rhetorical, ritual, and visual mechanisms used to construct the image of the consecrated virgin, particular functions and effects that likened the virgin to a reliquary emerged.

[3] As the notion of iconic living, understood here as life dedicated to the pursuit of a state of coherence with a chosen deity, grew in popularity and became a common desired identity rather than the prerogative of a chosen few, approaches to holy life adapted accordingly. Thus, in the fourth century, the Church recast Christian life in iconic terms, with individuals who joined the faith being told they had regained Adam's "image and likeness" (Gen. 1.26-27) upon being "clothed with Christ" (Gal. 3.27) in baptism.⁸ The hierarchy within the cult was accordingly cast in terms of degrees of similarity to Christ.⁹ On the fringes of the Roman

⁵ For an overview, see P. Thomas Camelot, *Virgines Christi: La virginité aux premiers siècles de l'Eglise*, Paris 1944; id., "Les traités 'De virginitate' au IVe siècle", in: *Mystique et continence: travaux scientifiques du VIIe Congrès International d'Avon*, Paris 1952, 273-292; Elm, *Virgins of God*; Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh*.

⁶ Brown, *The Body and Society*; Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire. The Development of Christian Discourse*, Berkeley 1991; Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes. The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995), no. 1, 25-46; Andrew S. Jacobs, "Writing Demetrias: Ascetic Logic in Ancient Christianity", in: *Church History* 69 (2000), 719-748.

⁷ For challenges posed by having almost exclusively male authors and a lack of female 'voices', see e.g. Shaw, "Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness"; Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian After the 'Linguistic Turn'", in: *Church History* 67 (1998), 1-31.

⁸ Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany: Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400-ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016 (= *Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 6), 19-108.

⁹ Both during the Eucharistic liturgy and outside of it, bishops 'impersonated' Christ. See Vladimir Ivanovici, *Chosen Vessels. Embodying the Divine in Late Antiquity*, forthcoming. As the bishop eventually monopolised the role of image of Christ, in the sixth century other categories were given different biblical models to impersonate, see Vladimir Ivanovici, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Staging of Divine Order in Sixth-Century Architecture", in: *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Origins of Christian Visual Culture*, eds.

world, those who sought to attain such a state on their own often escaped episcopal authority.¹⁰ The popularity of these ascetics catalysed the phenomenon of pilgrimage to the living saints, which testifies to both belief in the capacity of living individuals to live a holy life, and to the common desire to see the divine reflected on the bodies of living saints.¹¹ The same notions underscored the new image of the virgin who, as pointed out by Peter Brown, became the urban counterpart of the desert ascetic, with her standing "for all that was most holy and enduring in the heart of the settled land".¹² Nevertheless, while the symbolism of the desert ascetic drew on a number of traditions which were bridged and reworked into a Christian model, that of the holy virgin woman was regulated by bishops.¹³ The household-related life of women tended to make female sanctity an urban phenomenon, which placed it within the range of episcopal control.¹⁴ With the behaviour of virgins regulated already in the previous centuries, the fourth century seems to have brought a heightened interest in their role as sacred figures inside the Christian communities, as well as in the manners in which this sacred status was signalled on the body.

[4] The correspondence between one's character and its outlook that was theorised in the early centuries CE was institutionalised by the Roman state over the course of the fourth century. Following a model borrowed from the military, status was expressed on and by one's costume. In this context, the Church developed its own visual canons. After promoting a look that was meant to indicate modesty in the first centuries CE, for lay and clergy members alike, bishops eventually agreed on the need to indicate through costume, in the Roman manner, one's belonging to the clergy.¹⁵ Beginning in the fourth century, first the clergy and subsequently other categories were set apart through specific

Francesca Dell'Acqua and Ernesto Mainoldi, forthcoming.

¹⁰ On stylites, e.g., see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), no. 3, 523-539 (DOI: [10.1353/earl.1998.0045](https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1998.0045)).

¹¹ Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2000 (= *Transformations of Classical Heritage*, 30). For a recent discussion of the gendering of pilgrimage in Late Antiquity, see Rebecca Falcasantos, "Wandering Wombs, Inspired Intellectuals: Christian Religious Travel in Late Antiquity", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25 (2017), 89-117.

¹² Brown, *The Body and Society*, 271.

¹³ On ascetics as agents of syncretism, see David Frankfurter, "Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003), no. 3, 339-385, id., *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, NJ 2018; on the symbolic connotations of the iconic ascetic, see the contribution by Bogdan G. Bucur and Vladimir Ivanovici in this special issue.

¹⁴ On the relationship between women and the household in Late Antiquity, see Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, UK 2008, 210 and the contribution by Hannah Hunt in this special issue; Brown, *The Body and Society*, 271.

looks that translated simultaneously authority and holiness of life. When it came to female virgins, the expectations that their holy life would alter their physical appearance disaccorded with the limited iconic potential that the Church recognised for their gender. While male Christians strove to maintain the Adamic/Christ-like iconic state regained in baptism—with bishops and male saints held to embody the state in close to perfect manner—women, even as saints, had a limited visual representativeness. Following Paul's identification of men with the image of God (1Cor. 11.7), women were considered incapable of attaining the "image and likeness" in similar potency as their male counterparts. Although Christian 'theological schools' developed divergent views on the matter, or left it unaddressed altogether, the inherited bias towards women and their public representativeness, rooted in medical theories developed in Antiquity, prevented the appearance of a theory of female iconicity in visual terms, as for holy males.¹⁶ Rather than stating it, fourth-century authors made use of analogies and metaphors that placed the virgin's body in a specific relationship with the divine. The resulting model, on which we will now focus, retained a sense of both female physiology and its limited iconic potential.

Living reliquaries

[5] The idea that it was possible to distinguish 'true' virgins from 'false' ones based on their outer appearance—a common theme in Patristic 'virgin-literature'—indicates the phenomenon's shaping by Roman physiognomic conventions, which held character to reflect on one's body.¹⁷ A key element in the culture of corporeal scrutiny and self-presentation was the notion of *gaze*. Based on theories about the mechanics of sight, which credited it with enabling physical contact between the viewer and the object of sight, malevolent gaze was seen as intrusive, and constituted visual rape.¹⁸ Presented as "Brides of Christ", consecrated virgins were expected to maintain their 'interior' (*penetralia*) untouched until the arrival of the divine Bridegroom. Exposure to malevolent or lustful gaze could potentially cancel the virgin's effort to remain chaste. Nevertheless, the virgin's apotropaic effect and her role as a reminder that angelic life was within reach made her public presence essential; bishops

¹⁵ On the development of a particular style for the clergy as the Church adopted the "Roman culture of appearance", see Bernhard Jussen, "Liturgy and Legitimation, or How the Gallo-Romans Ended the Roman Empire", in: *Ordering Medieval Society. Perspectives on Intellectual and Practical Modes of Shaping Social Relations*, ed. id., Philadelphia 2000, 147-199.

¹⁶ See the discussion in the contribution by Hannah Hunt in this special issue, with bibl.

¹⁷ See Sissel Undheim, "Veiled Visibility. Morality, Movement and Sacred Virginitly in Late Antiquity", in: *The Moving City: Processions, Passages and Promenades in Ancient Rome*, eds. Ida Östenberg, Simon Malmberg and Jonas Bjørnebye, London/New York 2015, 59-71.

¹⁸ Much was written in past years on haptic vision in Late Antiquity. With regards to virgins and the possibility of visual rape, see Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh*, 79, 95, esp. 109-114.

therefore took the opportunity posed by the need to both display and protect her to regulate (and thus control) the ways in which the virgin and the power residing in her were accessible.¹⁹

[6] Christian authors thus recommended that virgins limited their interaction with the world by staying inside, wearing covering clothing, and remaining silent; and set for them specific spaces, both at home and in churches. Concurrent to recommendations to avoid revealing and colourful clothes, jewels, makeup, and even cleanliness, bishops praised the angelic beauty of virgins; a visual paradox.²⁰ A similar contrast is discernible in the period in the case of desert ascetics, whose emaciated bodies were presented as angelic in hagiographic texts. While in the case of ascetics authors played on the contrast between the body and the power residing in it, which at times manifested as an otherworldly luminosity, for virgins it was the combination of their description using poetic language (inspired by the Scriptures) and control of *when* and *how* they were seen that created the fascinating dimension of their presences.²¹

[7] By confining consecrated virgins to the *cubiculum* (bedroom), the most isolated space of the house,²² where they were expected to wait and contemplate the coming of the Bridegroom, Christian authors enabled an analogy between the virgins' bodies and temples.²³ Contemporary conceptions of female anatomy saw women through the prism of their child-bearing function, as receptacles. Closed

¹⁹ On the role consecrated virgins played in the consolidation of episcopal authority and in the construction of holy places, see Elm, *Virgins of God*; David G. Hunter, "Sacred Space, Virginal Consecration and Symbolic Power. A Liturgical Innovation and its Implications in Late Ancient Christianity", in: *Spaces in Late Antiquity. Cultural, Theological and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Juliette Day et al., London 2016, 89-105.

²⁰ Elm, *Virgins of God*, 262-269; Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*; Rebecca Krawiec, "'Garments of Salvation': Representations of Monastic Clothing in Late Antiquity", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009), no. 1, 125-150: 126, points out the paradox between transcendent perfection and material imperfection that was articulated in the unstable markers of the monastic habit. For the untrustworthiness of the "look of virginity", see Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 79-83 and 167-173.

²¹ On ascetics, see e.g. Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993), 21-45; Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*; Burrus, "Reading Agnes. The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius".

²² Undheim, "Veiled Visibility"; Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change*, 209-210.

²³ E.g. Ambrose, *De virginibus* 2.2 (ed. PL 16.211), *De institutione virginis* 17.105 (ed. PL 16.331), *De exhortatione virginitatis* 2.10 (ed. PL 16.339); Jerome, *Epistula* 22.23 (ed. PL 22.409-410); Athanasius, *De virginitate* 11 (ed. PG 28.264); Basil of Caesarea, *Epistle* 46.3 (ed. PG 32.373-376). Further references can be found in Neil Adkin, *Jerome on Virginity: A Commentary on the Libellus de virginitate servanda (Letter 22)*, Cambridge 2003 (= ARCA, 42), 207. See the discussion in Hunter, "Sacred Space", 101; cf. also Brown, *The Body and Society*, 74.

in her *cubiculum*, the vessel-like virgin emerged as the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem; a chamber within a chamber. The analogy was reinforced by their praise as Brides of Christ awaiting the Bridegroom's arrival, since the Holy of Holies too was entered by one person alone, the High Priest. Like temples, the virgin's body was impenetrable and it protected from sight that which resided inside, while allowing its power to be present in the sense-world. The Jerusalemite dimension of the analogy was strengthened through the virgin's association to the Ark of the Covenant—the container that was found inside the Holy of Holies —, as well as with the Temple vessels, which were also considered sacred and kept inside:

*Therefore I conjure you before God and Jesus Christ and his elect angels to guard that which you have received, not readily exposing to the public gaze the vessels of the Lord's temple (which only the priests are by right allowed to see), that no profane person may look upon God's sanctuary. [...] And assuredly no gold or silver vessel was ever so dear to God as is the temple of a virgin's body.*²⁴

Christian authors thus played with the semantic possibilities of the virgin's container-like body, associating the virgin with the Temple, the Ark, the Holy of Holies, as well as with the virgins' somewhat paradoxical role model, Mary's pregnant body.²⁵

[8] As containers, all these instances had the function to both hide and enable contact with that which resided inside. In the case of living containers, that is the Virgin Mary and consecrated virgins, in keeping with Roman notions of correspondence between spirit and body, the state was thought to alter their

²⁴ Jerome, *Ep.* 22.23 (ed. PL 22.409-410, trans. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 6: *Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Rev. Henry Wallace, New York [1893] 2007, 31): *Itaque obtestor te coram Deo, et Christo Jesu, et electis Angelis ejus ut custodias quae coepisti, ne vasa templi Domini, quae solis Sacerdotibus videre concessum est, facile in publicum proferas; ne sacrarium Dei quisquam profanus aspiciat. [...] Neque enim vas aureum, et argenteum tam carum Deo fuit, quam templum corporis virginalis.* Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 199.18 (ed. PG 32.717-720); *De lapsu virginis consecratae (De lapsu Susannae)* 6.24 (ed. PL 16.374, trans. Maureen Tilley, "An Anonymous Letter to a Woman Named Susanna", in: *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis, Princeton 2000, 218-229, 223), cf. 1Cor. 3.16-17.

²⁵ For the (sometimes contradicting) conceptions of the anatomy of virgins, see e.g. Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, London 1990; Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writer's Woman", in: *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. Froma I. Zeitlin, John J. Winkler and David M. Halperin, Princeton, NJ 1990, 309-337; Julia Kelto Lillis, "Paradox in Partu: Verifying Virginity in the Protevangelium of James", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24 (2016), no. 1, 1-28. The paradoxes of this rhetoric of virginity, and the association of sacred virgins with the virgin Mary are discussed in Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 155-188. See also Foletti, "Des femmes à l'autel? Jamais!", for the relationship between the Virgin Mary and various types of consecrated women in Late Antiquity.

appearance.²⁶ Thus, the Virgin Mary was likened to an alabaster vessel that glowed from within, to a cloud penetrated by the sun's light, and other images that conveyed the image of a container that emanated a dim aura (Fig. 1); a theophanic effect that contrasted the flashing light enveloping male ascetics.²⁷ The iconic state manifested at the Transfiguration was reachable by both male and female saints, with the essential distinction that women's luminosity was mainly internal.



1 Virgin Mary depicted with *Konturlicht*, a luminous radiance that surrounds the whole body, pointing to its emanating quality; mosaic, Visitation scene, apse of the Basilica Euphrasiana, Poreč, ca. 559 (photo: Vladimir Ivanovici)

[9] Apart from keeping with the 'structure' of the female body, the state of 'temple' referenced an anthropological model that had been central to Christianity for over three centuries. The apostle Paul had rejected the model of iconicity represented by Moses' luminous face, and presented the human being as a temple of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Shaped on the body of Jesus, held to have

²⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6 (ed. PL 16.197).

²⁷ For the Marian images, see e.g. Nicholas P. Constatas, "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 3 (1995), no. 2, 169-194. On the male Fathers, see Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, and the contribution by Bogdan G. Bucur and Vladimir Ivanovici in this special issue.

²⁸ On Moses, see 2Cor. 3; on Christian as temples, see 1Cor. 6.19. Pauline anthropology is a widely discussed matter, for the issue at hand, see e.g. George H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context. The Image of God, Assimilation to God and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity*, Tübingen 2008.

replaced the Temple in Jerusalem as *locus* of God's presence in the world,²⁹ the anthropological model introduced by Paul had the Divine Presence dwell inside one's body, and manifest through the contrast between the frailty of the person and the power residing in it:

*When we received the remission of sins, and put our hope on the Name, we became new, being created again from the beginning; wherefore God truly dwells in us, in the habitation which we are. [...] himself prophesizing in us, himself dwelling in us, by opening the door of the temple (that is the mouth) to us [...]. For he who desires to be saved looks not at the man, but at him who dwells and speaks in him, and is amazed at him [...]. This is a spiritual temple being built for the Lord.*³⁰

[10] This model was popularised through hagiography, where the martyrs' resistance to torture and apparent lack of pain confirmed Paul's claims. Held to have the Holy Spirit inside upon being arrested (as promised by Jesus: Mark 13.9-13, Matt. 24.9-13, Luke 21.12-19), it was believed that Christians awaiting trial or execution had access to arcane knowledge, enjoyed tours of heaven, and had the power to intercede for others.³¹ In the arena, Christ Himself was believed to inhabit the martyr, taking over the person:

²⁹ On the body of Jesus as Temple in the literal, container-like sense, see Mary Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, Collegeville 2001, 219; Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John*, Sheffield 2002, 6; Peder Borgen, "The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria", in: *Light in a Spotless Mirror. Reflections on Wisdom Traditions in Judaism and Early Christianity*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Michael A. Daise, Harrisburg/London/New York 2003, 45-76.

³⁰ *Ep. of Barnabas* 16.7-10 (ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, Cambridge 2003, 70-75): *εύρίσκω οὖν, ὅτι ἔστιν ναός. πῶς οὖν οἰκοδομηθήσεται ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι κυρίου, μάθετε. πρὸ τοῦ ἡμᾶς πιστεῦσαι τῷ θεῷ ἦν ἡμῶν τὸ κατοικητήριον τῆς καρδίας φθαρτὸν καὶ ἀσθενές, ὡς ἀληθῶς οἰκοδομητὸς ναὸς διὰ χειρός, ὅτι ἦν πλήρης μὲν εἰδωλολοτρείας καὶ ἦν οἶκος δαιμονίων διὰ τὸ ποιεῖν, ὅσα ἦν ἐναντία τῷ θεῷ. Οἰκοδομηθήσεται δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι κυρίου. προσέχετε δέ, ἵνα ὁ ναὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἐνδόξως οἰκοδομηθῇ. πῶς, μάθετε. λαβόντες τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν καὶ ἐλπίσαντες ἐπὶ τὸ ὄνομα ἐγενόμεθα καινοί, πάλιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς κτιζόμενοι· διὸ ἐν τῷ κατοικητηρίῳ ἡμῶν ἀληθῶς ὁ θεὸς κατοικεῖ ἐν ἡμῖν. πῶς; ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ τῆς πίστεως, ἡ κλῆσις αὐτοῦ τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, ἡ σοφία τῶν δικαιοματίων, αἱ ἐντολαὶ τῆς διδαχῆς, αὐτὸς ἐν ἡμῖν προφητεύων, αὐτὸς ἐν ἡμῖν κατοικῶν, τοὺς τῷ θανάτῳ δεδουλωμένους ἀνοιγῶν ἡμῖν τὴν θύραν τοῦ ναοῦ, ὃ ἔστιν στόμα, μετάνοιαν διδοὺς ἡμῖν, εἰσάγε εἰς τὸν ἄφθαρτον ναόν. ὁ γὰρ ποθῶν σωθῆναι βλέπει οὐκ εἰς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' εἰς τὸν ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικοῦντα καὶ λαλοῦντα, ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἐκπλησσομένης, ἐπὶ τῷ μηδέποτε μήτε τοῦ λέγοντος τὰ ῥήματα ἀκηκοέναι ἐκ τοῦ στόματος μήτε αὐτὸς ποτε ἐπιτεθυμηκέναι ἀκούειν. τοῦτό ἐστιν πνευματικὸς ναὸς οἰκοδομούμενος τῷ κυρίῳ.*

³¹ For an overview of the early martyr's symbolism, see Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, London 2004. On the martyr's relationship with the Holy Spirit and Christ, see Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, Oxford/New York 2010.

*What I am suffering now [as young woman imprisoned while pregnant] I suffer by myself. But then [in the arena] another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.*³²

The martyr thus embodied Christ in the literal sense, as a vessel that hid a divine presence. Like Jesus in the Transfiguration, there were moments when the divine was seen as glowing through the body, as confirmation of his or her exalted state.³³

[11] With the idea that humanity was essentially iconic coming to the fore in the fourth century, the temple-like anthropological model of interaction with the divine in one's body seems to have been adapted for virgins. The analogy worked because it both circumvented the visual dimension and exalted the virgin through association with martyrs. Thus, during the fourth century bishops held up the martyr as model for the consecrated virgin. Virginal life was presented as martyrdom, with Ambrose of Milan and other Fathers arguing that "virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because *it itself makes martyrs*".³⁴ In his praise of the virgin, Ambrose credits her with both the power to intercede with God for her loved ones, in the manner the famous martyr Perpetua had done for her brother, and with emanating the sort of consecrating power commonly associated with relics.³⁵ Thus, the bishop of Milan says, 'having' a virgin in the family is a blessing for the household.³⁶

[12] As in the case of martyrs, the analogy with vessels of the Holy Spirit made the virgins' bodies points of interest for their communities. As he prepared for his

³² *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 15.6.30-32 (ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford 1972, 123-125): *Modo ego patior quod patior; illic autem alius erit in me qui patietur pro me, quia et ego pro illo passura sum*. Cf also *Martyrium Polycarpi* 2 and *Epistola Ecclesiae Viennensis et Lugdunensis* 23 (ed. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 2 and 68); Ignatius, *Ad Smyrn.* 4.2 (ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Cambridge 2003, 298-301); Tertullian, *De pudicitia* 22 (ed. PL 2.1026-1030).

³³ *Martyrium Pionii* 22.4.26-29; *Acta Pauli* 3.34; *Martyrum Mariani et Iacobi* 9.2.20; *Martyrium Montani et Lucii* 4.2.8-11, 21.8-9 (ed. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*).

³⁴ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.3.10 (ed. PL 16.191, trans. NPNF 10.365): *Non enim ideo laudabilis virginitas, quia et in martyribus reperitus, sed quia ipsa martyres faciat*. For the merging of virgin martyrs and consecrated virgins, see Sissel Undheim, "Double Martyrdom, Double Crown. Virgin Martyrs, Gender Competition and Fourth-Century Ascetic Hierarchies", in: *Gender and Status Competition in Pre-Modern Europe*, ed. Martha Bayless et al., forthcoming. The notion of the virgin as a living martyr builds on the tradition that presents asceticism as "daily martyrdom", cf. L. Stephanie Cobb, "Memories of the Martyrs", in: *Melania. Early Christianity Through the Life of One Family*, eds. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder, Berkeley 2017, 112.

³⁵ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.7 (ed. PL 16.198) cf. *Pass. Perp.* 4.2 (ed. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 110).

³⁶ Ambrose, *Inst. virg.* 1.1 (ed. PL 16.305-307).

martyrdom, Polycarp (69–155), bishop of the Christian community in Smyrna, "took off all his clothing, loosed his belt and even tried to take off his sandals, although he had never had to do this before: for all the Christians were always eager to be the first to touch his flesh".³⁷ Similarly, a fourth-century author exhorted a consecrated virgin to remember how women earnestly sought her kisses.³⁸ The desire for contact reflects belief in holy contagion, as in the case of the woman with blood loss (Matt. 9.20-22, Mark 5.25-34, Luke 8.43-48).³⁹ This model of dispersion through physical proximity was at the root of the cult of relics and, in the fourth century, appears as one of the side-effects of the identification of virgins as receptacles of the divine. Isolation of the virgin both at home and inside churches, along with her presentation as a vessel of God stimulated desire to have contact with her. While 'pious and noble women' got to kiss the virgins, the rest of the community had to settle for glimpses which, we will see, underlined the sanctity of the virgin's body. The relationship between the consecrated virgins' bodies, and the way in which they were 'displayed' in churches (and otherwise 'hidden' inside homes) have similarities to the treatment of relics.

[13] After using simple cloth wrappings, beginning with the fourth century Christians sought to embellish the containers in which they enclosed their most holy possessions. Whether parts of martyrs' bodies or contact relics—objects imbibed through touch with the power of living saints, corporeal remains, or places considered holy—these were placed in containers made of painted wood, ivory, marble, or precious metal (Fig. 2).⁴⁰ The aesthetic effect of the container

³⁷ *Martyrium Polycarpi* 13.2 (ed. and trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 13): ἀποθέμενος ἑαυτοῦ πάντα τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ λύσας τὴν ζώνην ἐπειρᾶτο καὶ ὑπολύειν ἑαυτόν, μὴ πρότερον τοῦτο ποιῶν διὰ τὸ ἀεὶ ἕκαστον τῶν πιστῶν σπουδάζειν, ὅστις τάχιον τοῦ χρωτὸς αὐτοῦ ἄψηται.

³⁸ *De laps. virg.* 6.24 (ed. PL 16.374).

³⁹ On the living body, see e.g. *The Gospel of Philip* 108 (trans. Hans-Martin Schenke, in: Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1: *Gospels and Related Writings*, Cambridge, UK/Louisville, 2nd ed. 2003, 201). On relics, see e.g. *Acts of Thomas* 170 (trans. Han J. W. Drijvers, in: Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2: *Writings Related to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, Louisville, 2nd ed., 1992, 404-405). On holy contagion, see David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, NJ 2017, 94-96.

⁴⁰ On reliquaries in this period, see Galit Noga-Banai, *The Trophies of the Martyrs. An Art Historical Study of Early Christian Silver Reliquaries*, Oxford 2008; Beate Fricke, "Tales from Stones, Travels through Time: Narrative and Vision in the Casket from the Vatican", in: *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 21 (2014), no. 2, 230-250; Jaś Elsner, "Relic, Icon and Architecture: The Material Articulation of the Holy in East Christian Art", in: *Saints and Sacred Matter: the Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. Cynthia Hahn and Holger A. Klein, Washington, D.C. 2015, 13-40; Ann-Marie Yasin, "Sacred Installations: The Material Conditions of Relic Collections in Late Antique Churches", in: *ibid.*, 133-151.

revealed the sanctity of the content, much in the way that the holy body was held to radiate. When privately owned, these were kept at home as a family's most prized possession.⁴¹



2 Reliquary box in silver with gilded elements, St. Sophia church, Sofia, Bulgaria, ca. 363-408 (photo: Mogadir, Wikimedia Commons)

[14] In late antique churches, reliquaries were often set into specific altar-like structures, usually placed in the aisles on the side of the presbytery; the likely space also of consecrated virgins.⁴² The literary source that discusses the location of consecrated virgins, *De lapsu virginis consecratae*, indicates that their space was shielded off with panels from the rest of the church, and that it was decorated with imagery consonant with virginal life:

Now you have to remember, don't you, that place where you stood in the church separated by boards and how pious and noble women earnestly ran there, seeking your kiss [...]. You have to remember, don't you, those precepts, which the inscribed wall itself flung at your eyes: 'The married woman and the virgin differ: the one who is not married thinks about the affairs of the Lord, how she might be holy in body and soul' (1Cor. 7.34).⁴³

⁴¹ See e.g. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change*, ad pass.

⁴² Subsequently, relics were embedded in the very structure of churches, see Yasin, "Sacred Installations".

⁴³ *De laps. virg.* 6.24 (ed. PL 16.374, trans. Tilley, "An Anonymous Letter", 223): *Nonne vel illum locum tabulis separatum, in quo in Ecclesia stabas, recordari debuisti, ad quem religiosae matronae et nobiles certatim currebant, tua oscula petentes, quae sanctiores et digniores te erant? Nonne vel illa praecepta quae oculis tuis ipse scriptus paries ingerebat, recordari debuisti: 'Divisa est mulier et virgo: quae non est nupta, cogitat quae Domini sunt, quomodo sit sancta corpore et spiritu.'*

Such a spatial contextualisation was only possible in one of the aisles, probably on the side of the presbytery as proximity to the altar would have translated the idea that virgins are those of the community who were the first to enter heaven, upon the arrival of the Bridegroom.⁴⁴ Although the quoted instance may very well represent an exception, and the physical separation of virgins in spaces decorated for them was not a rule, it is likely that consecrated virgins attended liturgical services as a group, and that they stood in the vicinity of the presbytery.

[15] The association of reliquaries and consecrated virgins seems to have been intended and consciously constructed by bishops. Introduced during the fourth century in order to assure episcopal control over who enjoyed the consecrated virgin status, the veiling ritual stressed this reliquary-like quality of the consecrated virgin.⁴⁵ Associated with important Feasts, the consecration seems to have eventually settled as part of the Easter vigil; the most important and elaborate liturgy of the year. Then, women taking the vow were invited individually to the altar, where the bishop recited a formula of consecration and placed a veil on their heads. With many obvious parallels to a Roman wedding ceremony, yet where the bridegroom was replaced by Christ, the ritual placed the virgin in direct relation with the altar which, in that very period, was becoming a receptacle of relics. Following *Revelations* 6.9, where the author claims to have seen "the souls of those slain for the Lord" under the altar, Ambrose and other bishops placed martyr relics inside or under the altar, thus transforming it into a reliquary; a practice that became widespread at an impressive pace.⁴⁶ As indicated by a number of episodes, the veil that represented the symbol of virginal status was seen as equivalent to the altar cloth. A girl who sought to avoid an arranged marriage, Ambrose tells us, placed her head underneath the altar and asked for the virginal veil, thus creating an analogy between the

⁴⁴ Methodius of Olympus, *Symp.* 7.3 (ed. Nathanael Bonwetsch, *Methodius von Olympus. Werke*, Leipzig 1917, 73-75).

⁴⁵ The formal consecration ceremony to be staged by a bishop in church is first historically documented during the fourth century, i.e. Ambrose, *De virginibus* 3.1 (ed. PL 16.319-320); Jerome, *Ep.* 147.6 (PL 22.1200). See David Hunter, "Clerical Celibacy and the Veiling of Virgins: New Boundaries in Late Ancient Christianity", in: *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus*, eds. William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vessey, Ann Arbor 1999, 139-152; id., "Sacred Space, Virginal Consecration and Symbolic Power". Less is known about the potential ritual staging of vows in the East, which might have often been a more private affair, cf. Elm, *Virgins of God*, 121 who describes different practices, among which also a public ceremony arranged by Basil of Ancyra (d. ca. 362). For Pulcheria's public declaration in the Great Church of Constantinople around 412, see Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels. The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women*, New York 2013, 262-263.

⁴⁶ See Ann Marie Yasin, "Sight Lines of Sanctity at Late Antique Martyria", in: *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*, eds. Bonna D. Wescoat and Robert G. Ousterhout, Cambridge, UK 2012, 248-280, with bibl. On Milan, see Ivan Foletti, *Oggetti, reliquie, migranti. La basilica ambrosiana e il culto dei suoi santi (386-972)*, Rome 2018, 27-43.

covered altar and the covered head.⁴⁷ The following century, empress Pulcheria (399–453) had one of her robes used as altar cover on account of her being a consecrated virgin.⁴⁸ The analogy between the virgin and the altar, made in writing by Christian authors, was thus staged during the consecration ritual, with the virgin displayed as a living altar in a period when altars were becoming reliquaries.⁴⁹

[16] In Jerome's (347–420) letter to the aristocratic virgin Demetrias, he portrays her upon receiving the veil and benediction, making her quote the Song of Songs (1.4): "the king has brought me into his bedchamber"; to which the consecrated virgins in the church responded with a verse from Psalm 45, "the king's daughter is all glorious within".⁵⁰ The "within" was essential to the manner in which the virgin related to the Divine Presence. While her sanctity was not iconic in the manner of her male counterparts, she was nonetheless envisioned as 'glowing', as the 'glory within' pervaded her body. The effect is discernible in the virgins' mise-en-scène in churches. Peter Brown remarked decades ago how the virgins' "severely drawn and luminous features, glimpsed in the local church, would instil awe into the Christian community".⁵¹ In the increasingly darker interiors of late antique churches, with their play of shadow and light contrasts, the sun-deprived visages of virgins who spent their lives between the *cubiculum* and the church may have appeared otherworldly.⁵² Like the angels they were so often compared to, the assembly of virgins probably stood out as ethereal apparitions.⁵³

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.11 (PL 16.205-208).

⁴⁸ Cf. Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 9.1 (ed. PG 67.1593-1598). According to the *Liber pontificalis Ravennatis* 80 (ed. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Agnelli Ravennati Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, Turnhout 2006 [= *Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis*, 199], 248-249), bishop Maximian (546–556) donated to Ravennate churches altar cloths, some of which were of the same materials and with the same iconographic motifs—the three Magi bearing gifts—as empress Theodora's (ca. 500–548) robe, as shown in mosaics in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna (ca. 547).

⁴⁹ Carolyn Osiek, "The Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol", in: *The Second Century* 3 (1983), 159-169.

⁵⁰ Jerome, *Ep.* 130.2 (ed. Isidorus Hilberg, Leipzig 1918, 176-177; trans. Hunter, "Sacred Space", 95). See also Jacobs, "Writing Demetrias".

⁵¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 269.

⁵² On the diminishing of natural lighting in churches beginning with the fifth century, see Francesca A. Ladi, "I finestrati laterali delle chiese di Roma dal IV al IX secolo", in: *Ecclesiae urbis: Atti del congresso internazionale di studi sulle chiese di Roma (IV-X secolo)*, eds. Federico Guidobaldi and Alessandra Guiglia Guidobaldi, Città del Vaticano 2002 (= *Studi di antichità cristiana*, 59), 875-890.

⁵³ See e.g. Virgil, *Aeneis* I.591-599 (ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, *Virgil. Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, Cambridge, MA 1916 [= *Loeb Classical Library*, 63], 282), or the epitaph of Allia Potestas, vv. 17-19 (ed. and trans. Ella Bourne, "The Epitaph of Allia Potestas", in: *The Classical Weekly* 9/15 (1916), 114-116).

[17] Like that of the martyr before it, the virgin's body was thus conceived of as both a container and a relic *in spe*. Indeed, coming to confirm the status that bishops claimed for virgins, were extraordinary cases in which, upon death, the virgin's body continued to glow. For example, Gregory of Nyssa (335–394) tells how, when it was being prepared for burial, the body of his sister Macrina shone, as sanctity and spiritual beauty radiated through her flesh:

*She glowed, even in the dark mantle. The divine power seems to have added this gift to her flesh so that a light radiated from her beautiful body, just as I had envisioned in my dream.*⁵⁴

In the dream that he refers to, Gregory had seen himself holding martyr relics in his hands; relics that glittered like a mirror in the sun. As Peter Brown has pointed out, Gregory saw this dream as a foreboding of Macrina's death, and of how her "body had become a holy thing, on which the grace of God had come to rest".⁵⁵ Imbued by the divine through cohabitation with the Holy Spirit—a state of which Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 108) gives a fascinating first-hand account—the flesh of martyrs and virgins was believed to preserve the power even after the soul left it, continuing to manifest the divine as a dim glow. *Immobile*, on account of being ascribed specific spaces, *silent*, as bishops recommended they avoid making any noise, *glowing*, on account of their perceived inner light, and, at times, *fragrant*, consecrated virgins were simultaneously reified and sanctified.⁵⁶ In seeking to reconcile their container-like physiology with humanity's iconic dimension, bishops created a model of sanctity that functioned similarly to reliquaries made of precious material: as vessels enclosing the divine, and whose surface partially reflected the sanctity of the content. (Fig. 3)

⁵⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 32 (ed. Pierre Maraval, *Grégoire de Nysse: Vie de Sainte Macrine*, Paris 1971, 246; trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, Washington, D.C. 1967, 186, modified): ἡ δὲ ἔλαμπε καὶ ἐν τῷ φαιῷ, τῆς θεΐας, οἶμαι, δυνάμεως καὶ ταύτην προσθείσης τὴν χάριν τῷ σώματι, ὥστε κατὰ τὴν τοῦ ἐνυπνίου ὄψιν ἀκριβῶς αὐγὰς τινας ἐκ τοῦ κάλλους ἐκλάμπειν δοκεῖν.

⁵⁵ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 300 on Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 15 (ed. Pierre Maraval, *Grégoire de Nysse: Vie de Sainte Macrine*, Paris 1971, 192).

⁵⁶ On odour, see Brown, *The Body and Society*, 264; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, Berkeley 2006.



3 Zacharias holding a reliquary/Ark model; the same radiance envelops the body of the High Priest and the casket. Mosaic, apse of the Basilica Euphrasiana, Poreč, ca. 559 (photo: Vladimir Ivanovici)

Ethereal presences

[18] The consecrated virgin's prestige required proper visual markers. As particular looks for the clerical categories were established between the fourth and the sixth century, intermediary groups such as catechumens and neophytes also had their spiritual status signalled through costume. Written sources give little, and sometimes contradictory information on the dress of virgins, especially since it is not always easy to separate metaphors from actual descriptions in the sources.⁵⁷ Recommendations by third-century authors to wear unrevealing clothes in drab colours which prevented the virgin from becoming a focus of attention were likely altered in the fourth century, in order to reflect the new image of the virgin. The institutionalisation of consecrated virginity, its promotion as a distinct category, and the development of particular looks for the clerical categories indicate that the virgin too must have received a look that reflected her status. For the fourth century, Jerome attests to the virgin's status being the result of a reworking of Roman deportment canons:

[...] show yourself so that your heavenly birth appears and your divine freeborn status shines forth. Let there be in you an unusual gravity, admirable dignity, and amazing reserve, astonishing submission, virginal gait, and the appearance of true chastity, speech that is always measured and brought forth in its correct time, so that whoever sees you will marvel, and say: What kind of dignity is this, so unusual among people? [...] This is not a human arrangement or a mortal

⁵⁷ Metz, *La consecration des vierges*; Krawiec, "Garments of Salvation".

*discipline. Here, something heavenly glistens in a human body. I suppose that God is dwelling in certain people.*⁵⁸

[19] With Roman markers of virtuous life coming to be regarded as indicating sanctity in Jerome's time, it sufficed the virgin to excel in self-control in public space in order to indicate her sanctity.⁵⁹ By the end of the century, there are nevertheless strong indications that consecrated virgins were identifiable by a distinct dress, at least in the Western provinces.⁶⁰ A text describing the consecration ritual mentions virgins entering the church during the Easter vigil, together with the neophytes coming from the font. Neophytes were white-clad and held candles whose light, the text underlines, enveloped the virgins as they advanced towards the altar: "inter lumina neophytorum splendida, inter candidatos regni coelestis".⁶¹ With neophytes dressed coherently in white, their anointed faces resplendent as they reflected the light of the candles they held, it appears unlikely that virgins donned the drab clothes that third-century authors recommended. Rather, as in the case of neophytes, in order to both indicate their spiritual purity and set them apart from the rest of the community, they would have donned a certain type of vestment. The white of the neophytes' clothes indicated their iconic state, as baptism had annulled Adam's sin and returned them to the "image and likeness" of God. Their transformation came at the end of a forty-day struggle, the catechumenate, that was likened to the martyrs' toils.⁶² The virgins too were to embark on a martyr-like journey, dedicating their lives to Christ. Similarities between the two categories seem to recommend a white garment for virgins, as supported by both written and iconographic sources. Inside the Exodus chapel at El Bagawat (Egypt), a procession of seven virgins is shown approaching a temple-like structure (Fig. 4).

⁵⁸ Ps.-Jerome, *Ep.* 13.12 (ed. PL 30.172-173, trans. Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty*, 96): *Ita te exhibe, ut in te coelestis nativitas appareat, et ut divina ingenuitas clarescat: sit in te nova gravitas, honestas admirabilis, et stupenda verecundia, mira patientia, virginalis incessus, et verae pudicitiae habitus, sermo semper modestus, et suo in tempore proferendus: ut qui te videtur, admiretur, et dicat: Quae est haec nova inter homines gravitas? [...] Non est ista humana institutio, nec disciplina mortalis. Coeleste hic aliquid in corpore humano refulget. Puto quod habitet in quibusdam hominibus Deus.* On the authorship of the text, see Brinley R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, Woodbridge, NY 1991.

⁵⁹ Particular to Late Antiquity was the identification of signs of erudition and self-control as 'luminous', as well as of corporeal luminosity as indicator of holiness. Erudition, friendliness, and virtue were seen as manifesting through one's luminous complexion, and so did sanctity, see Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany*, 1-2.

⁶⁰ Undheim, *Borderline Virginities*, 79-83.

⁶¹ *De laps. virg.* 5.19 (ed. PL 16.372).

⁶² On catechumens as martyrs, see Gordon P. Jeanes, "Baptism Portrayed as Martyrdom in the Early Church", in: *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993), 158-176; Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany*, 39-40.



4 Procession of virgins, detail of the dome painting of the Chapel of Exodus, 4th–5th century CE, El Bagawat Necropolis, Kharga Oasis, Egypt; facsimile, tempera on paper, by Charles K. Wilkinson. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 30.4.140 (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

The women are shown donning an enveloping white attire that also covers their heads, leaving exposed only the face from the mouth to the forehead.⁶³ Holding lit candles, they could represent the Wise Virgins of the parable (Matt. 25.1-13) or, more likely, the seven virgins from the *Protoevangelium of James* 10.⁶⁴ The scene, nevertheless, might be collating various traditions regarding virgins in early Christianity.⁶⁵

[20] A depiction of the Wise and Foolish Virgins parable found in the sixth-century Rossano Gospels provides further visual testimony (Fig. 5). Likely of Syro-Palestinian origin, the splendid manuscript shows the ten virgins in a manner that

⁶³ In the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus, written ca. 280 CE, virgins are said to don white, immaculate robes (*Symp.* 8.1 and 3, ed. Bonwetsch, 80-84). See also Césaire d'Arles, *Régle des vierges* 44 and 55 (ed. Adalbert de Vogüé and Joël Correau, *Œuvres monastiques. Œuvres pour les moniales*, Paris 1988) for the prohibition of coloured clothing and his admonition that only neutral shades of white were allowed on the dress of the female habitants of his early 6th-century monastery. Discussed in Maureen Tilley, "Caesarius's Rule for Unruly Nuns: Permitted and Prohibited Textiles in the Monastery of St John", in: *Early Medieval Europe* 26 (2018), no. 1, 83-89, and Maria del Fiat Miola, "Permitted and Prohibited Textiles in the *Regula Virginum*: Unweaving the Terminology", in: *Early Medieval Europe* 26 (2018), no. 1, 90-102.

⁶⁴ Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, Santa Rosa 1995, 50.

⁶⁵ On the various interpretations of the scene, see David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, London 2001, 36-38; Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2008, 166-172; Michael Peppard, "Illuminating the Dura-Europos Baptistery: Comparanda for the Female Figures", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2012), no. 4, 543-574; Federica Candido, "The Symposium of Methodius: A Witness to the Existence of Circles of Christian Women in Asia Minor? Some Conjectures about an Interpretation that Goes Beyond Literal Fiction", in: *Methodius of Olympus: State of the Art and New Perspectives*, ed. Katharina Bracht, Berlin 2017, 103-124.

could quote a scene from church life in the period. The Wise Virgins, shown inside paradise together with the Bridegroom, don a white garment with golden trims. On the other side of the door, the five Foolish Virgins are donning similar costumes but in various colours. As noted by André Grabar and others, in the depiction of the scene the Scriptural text was not followed *ad litteram*, with the artist altering details in order to underscore the symbolism of the episode. Thus, the Foolish Virgins have empty receptacles of oil, although they had just gone to replenish them, reflecting the symbolic association of oil and good deeds in the period.⁶⁶ Similarly, we believe, in keeping with the common technique of depicting historic characters and settings using contemporary features (a strategy that assured the transmissibility of the scene's symbolism), the virgins are shown donning the costume consecrated virgins wore in the period.⁶⁷ Similar to the one in El Bagawat, the costume is now adorned with golden elements, as suiting the most holy state of the virgin.⁶⁸



5 The Wise and Foolish Virgins, manuscript illumination, Rossano Gospels, fol. 2v. Syro-Palestinian, 6th century. Museo Diocesano e del Codex, Rossano, Italy, cod. 1 (photo: The Yorck Project, Wikimedia Commons)

[21] Withdrawal from social life and denial of corporeal urges associated virgins to the angelic realm, and elevated them to an intermediary state, in between humanity and the divine.⁶⁹ As embodied angels, they were said to have already begun sharing in a mode of existence that others will only experience in the

⁶⁶ André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Princeton, NJ 1968, 90.

⁶⁷ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD*, Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2012, 206.

⁶⁸ Depictions of female virgin saints inside the sixth-century church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and the Archbishop's Chapel, both in Ravenna, as well as the roundels portraying virgin saints on the intrados of the apsidal arch in the Basilica Euphrasiana at Poreč are idealised. Shown in heaven, their golden and jewelled costumes reflect their sanctity, rather than their virginity which, we argue, is indicated by the white veil they don; a further testimony to the virgins' white costume.

afterlife.⁷⁰ White costumes both indicated and contributed to this status, by working towards the cancelling of their corporeality, and by stressing their luminosity. While its design hid the virgin's body, leaving exposed only her sun-deprived visage, its aesthetic stressed her angelic character. The effect was reproduced in contemporary depictions of women saints in mosaic, where their bodies were depicted in a hieratic manner that cancelled their curves, and costumes that hid their hair. Side by side in sixth-century churches, living virgins and characters depicted in hieratic manner reinforced each other, with the former conferring historic credibility to the latter, and the latter stressing the sanctity of the former (Fig. 6).



6 Mosaic portraits in the chapel of St. Zeno, church of Santa Prassede, Rome, ca. 822: Episcopa Theodora (mother of Pope Paschal I, the commissioner of the chapel), St. Pudenziana, the Virgin Mary, and St. Prassede (photo: Vladimir Ivanovici)

Conclusion

[22] In her article on the appearance of sanctity in Late Antiquity, Teresa Shaw pointed out the recurring topos of "ethics as art", where the virgin's character and soul were depicted as something to be artistically moulded, like a sculpture or painting.⁷¹ In keeping with the Judeo-Christian image of an artisan God who created humanity as an inspirited statue made in His image, the concept was put into practice, with an impressive corpus of texts being produced in order to 'shape' the virgin. Central to the process were the analogies which allowed the Fathers to exalt the virgin while respecting what was seen as a hindrance to its iconic potential, namely its physiology. Like the temples, altars, and martyrs she was likened to, the virgin was presented as a container of the Divine Presence, thus fulfilling the fundamental function of assuring physical nearness to the divine. Similar to the relic, her body enjoyed a derivative sanctity resulting from cohabitation with the Spirit and vicinity to her Bridegroom, Christ. Reified by the analogies that allowed it to be praised and by the ways in which its presence was staged, the consecrated virgin's body emerges as an intercessional paradigm that complemented the one represented by male saints in the same period.

⁶⁹ Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 114 n. 67. Ellen Muehlberger, "Ambivalence about the Angelic Life: The Promise and Perils of an Early Christian Discourse of Asceticism", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008), no. 4, 447-478.

⁷⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.36 (ed. PL 23.259-261).

⁷¹ Shaw, "Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness", 492-493.

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Special Issue Editors

Michele Bacci and Vladimir Ivanovici, eds., From Living to Visual Images. Paradigms of Corporeal Iconicity in Late Antiquity, in: RIHA Journal 0222-0229.

Copy Editor

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome

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