

BOOK REVIEW

Borderline Virginites: Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity. By SISSEL UNDEHEIM. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xi + 224. Hardback, \$140.00. ISBN: 9781472480170.

Sissel Undheim's *Borderline Virginites* examines the differing constructions of the idea of sacred virginity in Late Antique Rome by method of analyzing individual virgins and literary examples from the edges of society. An exploration of virgins on the boundaries of their respective groups allows Undheim to determine how Roman values permeated both pagan and Christian virgin identities in the 4th century. The tension between the fixity and flexibility (19-22) of the definition of virginity, and what makes a virgin, hinges on the Late Antique discussions raised in trying to categorize those virgins on the borderlines. Such virgins' uniqueness and/or subversive behavior illuminates the paradox of fixed rules with certain flexibility within them. It is not just their commitment to certain ascetic practices that define virgins and their virginity, but the complicated social and religious tensions present in the discussion and development of Roman virgins during this time. Previously, Roman pagan and Christian virgins were studied separately, or even in direct contrast to one another, especially by the contemporary Christian authors who strove to separate "their" virgins from those of the Roman traditional religion. In this volume, however, Undheim draws together what makes these sacred virgins not pagan or Christian, but specifically Roman.

In four chapters, Undheim explores the nature of virginity and the communities of individual virgins in 4th century Rome. The introduction, "*Sancta Virginitate: Limits and Border Zones*," explains the history of the definitions and usages of words such as *virgo*, *puella*, *mulier*, *castitas*, *pudica* and *univira*. The appropriations of certain terms and phrases by the early Christian church "were attempts to redefine and lay exclusive claim on the virginal status, resulting in contrasting

polemics that depended upon a distinction between false and true virgins” (10). Terminology also poses a problem in study, as certain terms were appropriated by both groups (Roman pagans and Church fathers) to describe consecrated virgins, male virgins, widows and vestal virgins in epitaphs, sermons and treatises (13). To combat the discourse of the early church fathers, Undheim continues to clarify the similarities in visual representation and public ritual. Undheim compares the rites of consecration of secular and sacred virgins. Both *captio*, the rite by which a Vestal virgin was elected (or taken) to become a priestess, and *velatio*, the rite by which Christian virgins were veiled and took vows of eternal virginity, paralleled the Roman marriage ritual, in which girls were taken from their families and veiled in a public ceremony (a bridegroom was often not even needed) (11-12). Such comparisons set the stage for her discussion on the fixity and flexibility of term idea of virginity and virgins themselves throughout her monograph.

In Chapter 1, “Roman Virginites. Between Rhetoric, Ideals, and ‘Reality,’” the focus turns to the concept of *romanitas* as it relates to virgins in the socio-cultural context of 4th century Rome. Undheim describes the external and visual markers of virginity, and the similarities and differences in the defining characteristics of virgins in late antique Rome. Undheim refers to the role of “the virgin effect” in the development of the perceived identities of virgins. Defined as “the perceived qualities attributed to virgins that in turn made virgins appear particularly apt for religious service” (33), the “virgin effect” appears fixed in qualities of age, social class, compartment in public and private, and dress. A virgin’s virginity was to be conducted in private but was also on public display. Typical “fixed” qualities in both secular and sacred Roman virgins were that she be a “young, female, aristocratic or freeborn” (85). The flexibility of qualities depended on her role as Christian virgin or Vestal, as her term could be lifelong or a fixed term, her duties differing and her specific dress as well. In either context, “the sacred virgin’s virginity was accentuated by symbols and markers related to the social world, and indicated a constant process in which the meaning of virginity for consecrated as well as non-consecrated virgins was mutually negotiated, reflecting both religious valuation of virginity as well as its socio-cultural valuation in more general terms” (31). In late antique Rome, it seems, a virgin could be recognized as a virgin by visual recognition alone, intensified by the joint symbolism and representation in art, literature and public spheres of pagan and Christian circles.

A sub-group not often discussed in scholarship or in early church writings, male virgins, define the focus of Chapter 2, “Ungendering Virginites? Virginal Paradoxes and Paradoxical Virginites.” Celibate clergy, eunuchs and ascetic men border the characteristics and designations of female virginity discussed earlier by Undheim and late antique authors. Virginity remains highly connected to both the individual’s body and the cultural and societal expectations of their gender. Undheim examines ancient instances of male virgins, such as Hippolytus, and treatises of early Church Fathers, concluding that, while the benefits of virginity could be flexible enough to include the male gender (and something to which an early Christian man should aim), in practice, the late antique Roman idea of virgins often remained fixed within the female gender.

The final chapter, “*De lapsu virginum consecratarum*. Crime and Punishment of Fallen Virgins,” Undheim adeptly uncovers the “rules” of virginal people by examining those who had left the community or broken their vows. In an expert look at multiple primary texts, Undheim explores the anxiety pagan and Christian sources had when it came to fallen virgins, particularly the Vestal, Primigenia and Christian virgin, Susanna. Both pagan and Christian sources, Undheim explains, had similar punishments, leading often to a symbolic death: “For the Vestals, this social death leads to inescapable physical death but, for the Christian virgins, there is a possibility of resurrection and forgiveness through the performance of penance. Their sacred status, however, can never be regained” (166). In both pagan and Christian communities, not only did a virgin’s fall affect them individually, but it also had repercussions for the community at large, because “the consequences of the crime represent a reversal of all the positive sides of the “virgin effect” ... and, as such, the imagined outcome highlights the value assigned to virginity” (164). The punishments reveal similarities between pagan and Christian ideas of virginity, in that both communities considered virginity difficult to maintain and achieve, therefore attained only by an exclusive few.

In *Borderline Virginites*, Undheim brings new insights into the understanding of virginity across boundaries artificially constructed, and often even contradicted, by ancients and modern scholars alike. Each chapter builds upon the other and reading them in order is beneficial to understanding the progression. Skipping to certain sections and headings within chapters might give one opportunity to

explore that subject however, the argument and full discussion could be misunderstood or overlooked if read in this way. The section on “Virginal Insignia” in “Chapter 2: Roman virginities” would have benefitted from images of mosaics, catacomb paintings and other visuals in which virgins were described. The focus on depictions of virgins here relies heavily on textual imagery from Christian writings such as those by Ambrose and Jerome. To further the work on the socio-cultural contextualization, it is important to include photographs or descriptions of the extant images contemporaries would have seen in and around Rome.

Sisell Undheim’s monograph succeeds in counteracting the residual effects of the Latin Church Fathers, who aimed to demarcate the Christian virgins from that of the “false virgins” of Roman paganism, most prominently the Vestal Virgins. In her socio-cultural approach, she explores the shared values, rhetoric and cultural constructs presented by the 4th-century writers and embodied (or rejected) by the sacred virgins themselves. The focus on the tensions inherently present in understanding late antique virginity allows for the discussion to spread beyond religiosity and focus on virginity as it was expressed and identified in Late Antique Rome. Undheim convincingly reveals the necessity of exploring the intersections between how contemporary pagans and Christians defined, controlled and promoted virginity. The borderlines of virgins and non-virgins, pagan and Christian, blur together to reveal a shared social-cultural context of *Romanitas*.

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