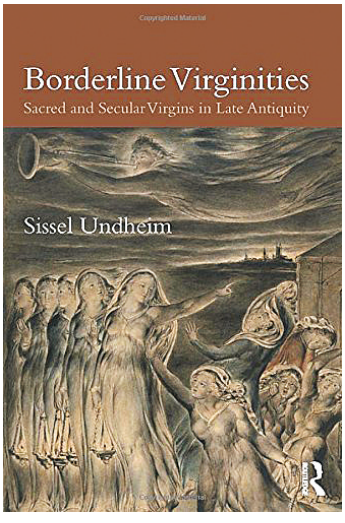
BORDERLINE VIRGINITIES



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SISSEL UNDHEIM'S BOOK, BASED ON HER 2011 Ph.D. thesis from the University of Bergen, examines the contested meanings of virginity in late Roman antiquity. She asks two main questions: how different was Christian virginity from pagan antecedents, and to what extent was the Christian virginal ideal only for women? Her answers to these questions, in four chapters, offer real insights into what she calls "the semantics of virginity" (10). Her sources range widely from histories, treatises on virginity, and decrees of early church councils to fictional stories from the romances and commemorations of the dead from funerary inscriptions.

The title of the book, as Undheim explains in her first chapter, alludes to a central preoccupation of hers: we understand the center of the virginal ideal in late ancient Christianity only by exploring its margins. She uses the terms "fixity" and "flexity" as a method for understanding these margins. Some aspects of the virginal ideal cannot be altered or removed; others can be "stretched" in different ways by individuals – but

only so far (which is why she prefers the metaphor of flexibility to that of fluidity). She uses this method to address both how virginity was "construed" by moralists and theologians and how it was "negotiated" by the individuals living the virginal life (2).

Undheim's second chapter compares pagan ideals of virginity, especially the Vestal virgins, with Christian forms. She notes how Christian authors drew sharp distinctions between the two and adds that most modern scholars have perpetuated this notion. Undheim points instead to similarities. First of all, she reminds us that when Christian asceticism first reached Italy in the fourth century, there were still Vestal virgins: the two versions coexisted until the Vestals were disbanded in 394. She focuses on three themes. One is the aristocratic lineage of virgins. The Vestals were drawn from the highest families of Rome. Yet Christians also frequently praised the noble birth of Christian virgins, even if they pretended to discount that birth in favor of a nobility of merit. And she notes the existence of enslaved female virgins in the entourages of their aristocratic counterparts, virtually unnoticed by contemporaries and ever since. The second area of focus is on the benefits of virginity to the community. Vestals were thought to protect Rome from its enemies. The advantages of Christian virginity were instead largely to the individual, bringing God's favor to the virgin herself, though a daughter's virginity was said to bring divine blessings on her family and especially to her parents. Undheim also wonders about another type of community benefit: the use of choirs of chanting virgins as happened in some pagan rituals, and adopted for use in some Christian ceremonies. The third area of focus is on choice. Vestals were consecrated by their parents at a young age, while Christian virgins were said to choose their lifestyle in adulthood. Undheim challenges this distinction, noting the widely differing opinions among Christians about the ages at which a Christian virgin might take her vow: Basil the Great suggested sixteen or seventeen, Ambrose and others thought she might be younger, and Church councils variously decreed minimum ages of twenty, twenty-five, and forty. Undheim also wonders how freely virginity was chosen by some: slaves, especially, though also daughters with physical deformities or those from families too poor to afford a dowry. Finally, Undheim collects what we know of the physical appearance of pagan and Christian virgins, but she concludes that the sources are too meager and contradictory on their dress and hairstyles.

The third chapter examines the gendered assumptions of virginity. She notes that while most Christian authors of treatises on virginity begin by claiming the ideal for both men and women, most of their works target only women. Indeed, male virginity was often considered so exceptional as to be implausible, except in childhood. Accordingly, she wonders the extent to which the noun *virgo* was considered as applicable only to women. Eunuchs, she determines, are the closest male equivalent to

the female virgin. Christian eunuchs are both like virgins in representing the sexless ideal, but also unlike eunuchs, since men applied to themselves the label of symbolic eunuch because they could not call themselves virgins. In this chapter, Undheim also speculates on the connection between consecrated female virginity and the rise of clerical celibacy, and the extent to which celibacy provided an alternative means to elevated status for Christian men that did not depend on their actual virginity.

Undheim's fourth and final chapter approaches the margins of virginity from a different angle: what was said about virgins who broke their vow? Here again, she compares the loss of virginity by the Vestal virgins to their Christian counterparts – finding a basic similarity between the actual death as punishment for pagan virgins to the symbolic death of Christian virgins through exclusion from communion until their deathbeds. She observes how Christian writers wondered about but could not agree on whether the woman's willingness or unwillingness mattered. This point leads her into a discussion of whether "virginity of the mind" or "virginity of the body" was ultimately more important, and she notes that, while there were tests for physical virginity, it was often the performance of a virginal demeanor – and thus, not all that different from the ancient Roman ideal of female *pudicitia* ("sexual modesty").

Undheim has read widely and situates her work within a broader conversation among scholars. She relies especially on Elizabeth A. Clark in her analysis of the effects of patriarchy on late ancient women, though also on Mary Beard on the Vestals, Peter Brown on sexuality, David Hunter on clerical celibacy, Aline Rousselle and Giulia Sissa on physical virginity, and myself on eunuchs. Her points are clearly made. There were only a few typos, which happens in all published writing, but when it is found with names and with the Latin it risks passing errors to general readers: Caecilus Metellus (53) should be Caecilius Metellus, Amphilocius of Ionucum should be Amphilocius of Iconium (64), John Cassian's *Conlactiones* should be *Conlationes* (106 and 121), Macellina should be Marcellina (102, n. 301), and *mos maiourm* should be *mos maiorum* (152). My own name is given in the text as Matthew Kuefler (120) and then as Mark Kuefler (122) when it should be Mathew Kuefler. The author uses "flexity" instead of "flexibility" – which works as a contrast to "fluidity" and "fixity" – but she also uses "androgynity" when "androgyny" is the correct noun (136, n. 33).

In the end, Undheim has accomplished much. Like other scholars in recent years, she has challenged us to reconsider the extent to which Christians abandoned old Roman traditions or whether we should think about them as merely adapting these old customs. If I have one criticism, it is a small one: while the title of her book implies that she will tell us both about "sacred and secular" forms of virginity, there is little actual discussion of the latter. Perhaps she might have considered refusal to marry for reasons other than religious: with the end of the laws penalizing the un-

married and childless in 320 it was possible both for individuals to choose not to marry without financial repercussions and for families to make decisions about leaving some of their children unmarried as part of a larger strategy of providing inheritances or leaving options for social and political networks open. Admittedly, these ideas are far afield from Undheim's interests, but she might have more accurately referred to "pagan and Christian virgins" in her subtitle. This criticism aside, Unheim has explored the diverse meanings of late Roman virginity in skillful and innovative ways, and she has provided new insights and much food for thought.