



CMRS Conference

Signs of Sex: Comparative Semiotics of Virginity in the Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Worlds

Thursday, May 13 – Friday, May 14

Organized by GIULIA SISSA
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UCLA

Virginity can be defined as a condition of sexual integrity, more specifically as the inexperience of full intercourse. This condition concerns mostly women before heterosexual coition. It involves corporeal, social, moral and emotional aspects. In modern Western anatomy, a thin piece of skin is allegedly located at the entrance of the vagina: its breakage is supposed to signify that penetration has occurred, whereas its integrity is supposed to bear witness to a woman's sexual intactness. The reduction of virginity to a single anatomical part has always been highly controversial in Western medicine. The semiotic reliability and the very existence of the "hymen" have always been questioned.

The fact that the modern "hymen" is named after one of the generic words for "membrane" in ancient Greek may impair our understanding of the history of virginity. But it is a matter of textual fact that, although in Greece and Rome, virginity was acknowledged as the condition of a woman's entire body, it was seen as a state of sexual inexperience. This did not require, however, the idea of a vaginal stopper, the so-called "hymen". The controversy about the "hymen" begins in ancient medicine, where the existence of a natural sheet surrounding or covering the opening of the vagina was either ignored or forcefully denied. Hippocratic physicians never describe any such thing as a membrane that obstructs naturally the female sex. Soranus, a physician born in Ephesus, but active in Alexandria and Rome, at the beginning of the second century CE, does mention a transversal tissue sealing the vagina, but, in his opinion, this is merely a belief to be rejected as false, ψεύδος.

This conference is intended to shed light on this crucial moment in late Antiquity, and to explore, in a multicultural world, the emergence of a more and more complex domain of knowledge in which the

imperative to find signs of virginity (and the loss thereof) converges with the demands of Jewish and Christian elaborations of sexual conduct.

THURSDAY, MAY 13

9:00 AM Welcome by [Zrinka Stahuljak](#), CMRS Director

9:10 [Giulia Sissa](#) (Departments of Political Science and Classics, UCLA)
“The Erotic Biography of Gendered Bodies”

10:00 [Avital Davidovich Eshed](#) (Women and Gender Studies Program, Tel Aviv University; Kogod Research Center at Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem)
“From Signs to Symbols. Bridal Virginity and the Ritualization of *Be’ilat Mišvah* (Religiously Sanctioned Intercourse) in Medieval Jewish Culture”

11:00 [Michael Rosenberg](#) (Hebrew College)
“Thinking with (Male) Virgins: Men’s Sexual Status in Rabbinic Literature”

12:00 PM [Romain Brethes](#) (Sciences Politiques, Paris)
“No Signs of Sex? Deciphering the Language of Masculine Virginity in the Greek Novel”

1:00 End of Day 1

FRIDAY, MAY 14

9:00 AM [Julia Kelto Lillis](#) (Union Theological Seminary)
“Virginity Takes Flesh: Late Ancient Christians and the Rise of Medically Perceptible Virginity”

10:00 [Sissel Undheim](#) (University of Bergen)
“Covering Up, Closing In. Regulating Sacred Virginity in Late Antiquity”

11:00 [Kaara Peterson](#) (Miami University of Ohio)
“The Nature of Virginity: Queen Elizabeth I’s Sieve Portraits”

12:00 PM Conclusion of Conference

[Please click here to register for the conference on Zoom.](#)

View this information on the CMRS website at <https://cmrs.ucla.edu/event/cmrs-conference-sissa/>

Image: Hans Memling, Allegory of Chastity, ca 1475.

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