Few concepts are spoken of with as little precision and as much confidence as the concept of virginity. Ubiquitous in many forms of pop culture and analyzed with increasing thoroughness in academic disciplines, virginity today most often refers to a state of inexperience with sexual intercourse, defined in ways that are often left unspecified and associated with ideas and values that are treated as self-evident. Despite a long history of application to various points of transition or forms of commitment, virginity terminology carries a misleading air of clinical clarity: so strong is the sense of everyone knowing what virginity is that those discussing it rarely use more than vague terms to convey their meaning.

A fascinating example is a set of 2018 publications concerning a type of lifelong Christian virginity. That year the Vatican published *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*, a document discussing a Roman Catholic practice of consecrated virginity in which women joining the Order of Virgins pursue ordinary careers and lay ministry (unlike members of some Catholic religious orders) while eschewing human marriage or romance and vowing themselves to an official marriage- or betrothal-like relationship with Christ.¹ *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*

---

¹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*; for context see Braz de Aviz, “Presentation of the Instruction.” The Order of Virgins gained publicity in the United States through news coverage of the wedding-like consecration ceremony of Jessica Hays in 2015.
emphasizes that a bride-like status is not unique to consecrated virgins, and an ambiguous, controversial passage appears to adjust guidelines for eligibility by explaining that “physical integrity” is not necessarily a prerequisite for all women who seek to become consecrated virgins. The passage met with protest from the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, which issued a statement defending the importance of “physical virginity” as a prerequisite for consecration.

The Vatican document, USACV statement, and much of the related news coverage treat “virginity” and “physical” virginity or “integrity” as terms that need no explanation; writers rely on readers’ knowledge of common definitions for making sense of the controversy.

This omission of definitions is typical. Both ancient and present-day writers have tended to use shared terms without acknowledging that their meanings for terms may not match. Scholars of early Christian studies fruitfully analyze the significance ancient authors ascribe to virginity, but they seldom have questioned the meaning of the term and the beliefs about bodies and sex that they themselves associate with it. Both within this field and in adjacent ones, scholars have described early Christian sources as offering either a homogeneous picture of virginal ideals or a fairly predictable set of conflicting arguments about whether virginity resides in the body or the mind. But much is missed when readers expect ancient sources to be homogeneous or to rehearse a familiar set of debates. Divergences in beliefs about human bodies go unnoticed. The breadth of exegetical and theological variety is narrowed. Viewers seeking to trace the shapes formed by interrelated ideas and practices find only parts of the larger constellations. By attending more fully to differences between ancient sources, scholars can more fully discern the richness and complexity of those sources.

2. The text emphasizes that the marital quality of the virgin-Christ relationship belongs to the entire Church and will be fully realized only in an age to come.

3. “The call to give witness to the Church’s virginal, spousal and fruitful love for Christ is not reducible to the symbol of physical integrity. Thus to have kept her body in perfect continence or to have practised the virtue of chastity in an exemplary way, while of great importance with regard to the discernment, are not essential prerequisites in the absence of which admittance to consecration is not possible” (Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago §88).

Virginity is a rewarding point of focus for attending to richness and complexity. It holds a privileged place in the history of Christian thought as an esteemed spiritual path, a legislative matter, and a topic that generates fierce theological dispute and ingenious theological reflection. In the earliest centuries of the Common Era, some Christians rejected marriage and preached permanent sexual abstinence for all Christians. The majority, who approved of marriage, expected young women to remain sexually virginal before they wed. Ancient Christians increasingly encouraged virginity as a permanent and exceptional lifestyle one might choose voluntarily, an avenue of heightened devotion to God that increases one’s Godlikeness and resembles the angel-like mode of life believers will enjoy after a future resurrection. Alongside renunciation of marriage, childbearing, and sexuality came ascetic practices like fasting or abstention from certain foods, renunciation of wealth, luxury, or ordinary comforts and pleasures, and intensive prayer. Virgins might take public or less formal vows and practiced various living arrangements—including seclusion in a family home or desert dwelling, companionship with a family member or celibate partner, communal same-gender or mixed-gender housing, itineracy and begging, and organized monastic life—and surviving sources reveal tension and disagreement among late ancient Christians over competing ascetic models, norms, and forms of authority. ("Late ancient" here designates the fourth to eighth centuries but with particular attention to the fourth and early fifth, a time of immense change for forms of Christianity practiced in the Roman Empire.) Early Christians thus forged internally divergent versions of virginity that also differed from the (mostly temporary) sorts of celibacy practiced by Vestal Virgins in Rome, oracular priestesses in Greece, or Cynic philosophers. During the same centuries, the virginity of Mary became a crucial point of discussion in the development of Christian identity and orthodoxy.

As we will see below and throughout this study, virginity is not a singular concept so much as a plurality of concepts. Present-day definitions are diverse

5. Extant texts that portray this position as heretical sometimes call such Christians “Encratites.” Among scholars, many debates over encratism have centered on the earliest forms of Syrian Christianity or on the group of texts known as the Apocryphal Acts of Apostles.
7. See Brown, Body and Society, 5–9, 31–32; related essays in Wimbush and Valantasis, Asceticism; and the diverse texts gathered in Wimbush, Ascetic Behavior.
and flexible, and early Christians developed a surprisingly vast range of conceptualizations. Previous scholarship cited across this book has accentuated other kinds of variety in early Christian thought and practice regarding virginity, yet most studies assume too much continuity between sources, owing in part to superficial commonalities between texts. Ancient discussions of virginity frequently overlap in repeated themes or biblical citations, such as descriptions of the entire Christian Church as a chaste, unblemished fiancée or bride of Christ (invoking 2 Corinthians 11:2–3 and Ephesians 5:25–32); ancient debates about Mary’s virginity proceed with little attention to definitions, giving the illusion that writers mean the same things by their terms. This monograph will show that the differences between early Christian configurations of virginity are more extensive and fundamental than scholars have previously acknowledged. Virginity mattered greatly to a great many Christians, but it mattered in varying ways and was defined in multiple ways, as well.

My study takes the approach of new intellectual history, where historical investigations of ideas and thinkers take into account the observations and questions of social scientists, social historians, and literary-critical theorists and the wider webs of social, theological, and rhetorical logic that render concepts in a text intelligible. I investigate “discourse” on virginity, working under the premise that concepts like virginity are human-made and are produced on an ongoing basis through human thoughts, words, acts, relationships, and systems. My research and arguments are shaped by feminist interests as well as an interest in theological reasoning, and I aim to offer useful analysis for readers of multiple fields and multiple approaches. Several terms warrant caveats. By investigating ancient Christian “female” virginity, I foreground constructions of girls’ and women’s bodies and lives in the texts of Christian writers who are almost always men, and in whose worlds of thought gender is often binary, sex acts are defined in terms of penetration,

9. Projects that analyze discourse—here meaning not just speech or writing about an object of knowledge but also the range of social and political processes that shape objects of knowledge and perceived truths about them—owe much to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his early works The Archaeology of Knowledge and “The Order of Discourse” (both available in English in Foucault, Archaeology). On early Christian discourse, see Averil Cameron, Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire.
10. See chapter 5 for further description of my aims as a feminist historian.
and erotism is usually an attraction between men and women. The limitations of that world and of modern attempts to anchor gender in a “female” body are easy to expose, and my willingness to rely on terms like “female” is not an endorsement. By specifying when texts concern “sexual” virginity, I classify some virginity discourse under a modern category that lacks exact parallels in ancient life and society. By focusing on “early Christianity,” I risk giving the impression that religious communities of antiquity were clear-cut entities. All such terms are necessary tools but carry the potential to mislead. Details on the scope and shape of this book appear in my final section below. In the next sections, I explain what makes virginity a timely topic and a flexible concept that requires case-by-case interpretation.

THE ONGOING SIGNIFICANCE AND FUNCTIONS OF VIRGINITY

The Continuing Significance of Virginity

The concept of sexual virginity is highly significant for many people and communities today. Even in contexts where expectations for premarital sexual purity are considered restrictive or obsolete, the loss of one’s virginity—often

11. Milestone works on the historiographical challenges of studying gender include Scott, “Gender”; Riley, Am I That Name; and Boydston, “Gender as a Question.” Influential studies of the instability of gender in Mediterranean cultures of the early Common Era include Gleason, Making Men, and Kuefler, Manly Eunuch. Although the presence of virgins and eunuchs complicates binary gender models for ancient and medieval or Byzantine periods, binary frameworks are common in ancient sources. Similarly, although same-sex eroticism is part of early Christian writers’ sociocultural landscape, they generally limit acceptable sexual relations to male-female intercourse, and discussions of female sexual virginity almost exclusively concern women’s relationships with men. On the limitations of defining sexual activity in terms of penetration, see Kotrosits, “Penetration and Its Discontents.”

12. On challenges, risks, and opportunities of historiographical engagement with sexual terms from a distant context, see Traub, Thinking Sex, 171–226. Debates for historiography of premodern sexuality have often hinged on whether to emphasize alterity (differences that divide modern from premodern groups) or identity (similarities across time), as illustrated by the contrast between essays in Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, Before Sexuality, on the one hand and, on the other, those in Fradenburg and Freccero, Premodern Sexualities, or Giffney, Sauer, and Watt, Lesbian Premodern; see also Traub, Thinking Sex, 57–81.

13. “Early Christianity” describes a set of diverse movements that did not always recognize one another as “Christian.” Boundaries between groups were constantly in formation and susceptible to change.
phrased in positive terms as one’s first time having sex, or in health and social science literature as “sexual debut”—is considered by many to be an important life event. Premarital virginity is encouraged or expected for members of various societies and groups, especially women, for whom the expectation is often more stringent or more strictly enforced than is the case with men (few studies or discussions of virginity expand beyond binary gender identifications). The initial examples below show the current prominence of female virginity in the health sciences and in diverse forms of virginity testing recently practiced around the globe; upcoming chapters discuss ancient analogues. The value attributed to female virginity is further attested by its commodification in genital modifications and paid sexual labor. Forms of virginity are understood to undergird or undermine the social order and are invested with great potency in varied social and religious arenas.

In recent decades, female virginity has become a major topic in healthcare and public policy worldwide. While sex education remains an area of concern, much of the current literature concerns virginity testing or virginity reconstruction. Most modern virginity tests involve examination of a vagina to look for evidence of penetration; examiners either look for damage to the hymen tissue that lines the opening of the vagina or assess the size or tension of the vaginal opening itself (the introitus), purportedly drawing a scientific conclusion about whether penetration has occurred either regularly, or at all. There is a growing consensus among medical experts that neither provides reliable evidence and that virginity thus cannot be medically verified, as I discuss at greater length below. Even so, testing has been reported across continents in a variety of medical and non-medical settings, in far-flung contexts and with various aims: to assess the sexual honor of prospective wives, to provide forensic evidence of sexual violence, to screen job candidates, to

14. Examples from the United States include young people’s “redefining” rather than “abandonment” of the concept of virginity, as noted by Carpenter, “Ambiguity of Having Sex” (quotation from 132) and Orenstein, Girls & Sex, 75–101. See also Bouris, First Time and Blank, “Process-Oriented Virgin.”
15. See Lillis, “Virginity in Healthcare.”
monitor students’ behaviors, to punish detainees, to reduce the risk of HIV transmission, and to defend the values and worldview of indigenous groups in colonized lands. In some settings, girls and women welcome the chance to have their virginity confirmed; others find tests traumatic, and some have killed themselves to avoid coerced testing. Human rights groups characterize virginity testing as a discriminatory and patriarchal mechanism to regulate women’s sexuality, and some classify forced virginity testing as an act of rape or torture. In 2018 the World Health Organization recommended a ban on all virginity testing. Increasing numbers of countries have criminalized testing to some extent, yet the tests’ diverse functions make it difficult to predict the future of the practice. Meanwhile, it remains common for non-virginal girls and women to face disadvantages in justice systems, even without medical assessment of their status. For instance, in the United States, the juvenile legal system has continued to rely on ideals of feminine sexual purity that are modeled on white middle-class society and adversely affect girls of color.

Virginity reconstruction or hymenoplasty, also known by a number of other names, is a category of surgical techniques for repairing or enhancing hymen tissue. The purposes and legality of hymenoplasty vary by country, culture, and situation; the surgery is often, but not always, intended to ensure coital bleeding or give the appearance of intactness so that family members or a partner will be assured of a woman’s virtue and suitability for marriage. A capsule with a blood-like substance can be added during surgery to raise the chances of bleeding during coitus. Some women seek hymenoplasty for cosmetic, pleasure-related, or therapeutic reasons. While requests for hymenoplasty by “Western” women do occur, most requests at Western clinics have come from members of immigrant communities whose perspectives the
physicians are seldom well-equipped to appreciate. In providers’ ethical deliberations, arguments against performing hymenoplasties include that the surgery is not medically necessary, that the surgeon may be taking part in deception, and that the procedure supports systems of gender inequality. Arguments in favor focus on respecting the patient’s agency and cultural location or reducing potential threats to their well-being, taking into account that their life, livelihood, or relationships may be endangered if they are suspected of engaging in premarital sex. Much as with voluntary virginity testing, conflicting views of the practice often stem from deep cultural differences.

Surgical techniques also exist for imitating other virginal genital features that are deemed desirable. There is a growing market for procedures like labia reductions that can address physical discomfort caused by clothing and exercise or address psychological dissatisfaction by conforming genital appearance to a perceived ideal, which often correlates with the youthful size and firmness of girls’ vulvas. The sex appeal of virginity is evident in pharmaceutical products and advertisements that link good sex with vaginal narrowness or tightness, promising sexually active women that they will “feel like a virgin.” Alongside the growing market for virgin-like genitals, virginity is commodified through its fetishization in pornography and its high value in sex work. Several young women have taken steps to auction off their virginity for thousands of dollars, with some news coverage reporting bids in the millions. The money paid by cosmetic surgery patients and sex work clients demonstrates the appeal and worth associated with female virginity today.

21. Ayuandini and Duyvendak, for example, highlight mistaken assumptions by Dutch physicians that sexually conservative female patients lack access to education and financial independence and thus should forgo surgery so as to become “more independent” and “more Dutch” (i.e., aligned with liberal secular versions of feminist values) (“Becoming (More) Dutch”).
22. Cook and Dickens, “Hymen Reconstruction”; Bawany and Padela, “Hymenoplasty and Muslim Patients.” See also Ahmadi, “Recreating Virginity as Resistance.”
23. Hamori, Banwell, and Alinsod, Female Cosmetic Genital Surgery; Desai and Dixit, “Female Genital Aesthetic Surgery.” For perceptive critiques of Western attitudes toward genital modification practices see Bernau, Virgins, 28, and Davis, “Loose Lips Sink Ships.”
24. See, for example, an advertisement and news coverage related to a gel for vaginal tightening and rejuvenation: “18 Again Ad” and BBC News, “Virginity Cream.”
26. Famous US examples include auctions for Rosie Reid (2004), Natalie Dylan (2008), and Katherine Stone (2016). For a discursive analysis of journalism covering some of these auctions, see Dunn and Vik, “Virginity for Sale II.”
Women’s virginity is, however, more than a commodity. Societies sometimes perceive it as a source of danger and a source of power, as well as a weathervane or symbol of communal and national well-being. Conspicuous examples come from South Africa, where some forms of sexual violence are linked with diverse ideas about the potency of virginity. In efforts many across the world find all too familiar, male assailants have sought to stabilize heteronormative systems and male sexual entitlement by raping women who refuse to make themselves sexually available and by attacking lesbians and trans men through “curative” rape, forcing penetration on those who appear to position themselves outside a heterosexual model of penile-vaginal penetration. In a different but still highly damaging vein, a mistaken belief that sex with a virgin can cure HIV has reportedly led some infected men to rape virginal girls or women. The notion of virginity bearing magical and medical power has a long history across many cultures, and its more general potency can become a bedrock of social stability or a dangerous fissure. Violent regulation and exploitation highlight the power associated with virgins.

Virginity also carries great ritual and theological power in religious practice. In some traditions, virginity (or a form of celibacy that resembles it) is a temporary or permanent duty of leaders or exceptional practitioners and enables special proximity to the divine or greater detachment from transient things. Prominent examples include Catholic and Orthodox Christian monks and nuns (who are considerably more numerous than the consecrated virgins discussed earlier) and some types of Buddhist monks and nuns. Kumaris, prepubescent girls in Nepal who embody a Hindu goddess, comprise a statistically small but striking example.

Members of several religious traditions place a premium on virginity as a moral responsibility for unmarried laypeople. Some identify lifelong lay singleness as a path rich with spiritual potential. The purity movement among

28. Jewkes and Abrahams, “Epidemiology of Rape,” 1240; Meel, “Myth of Child Rape as a Cure.” Similar occurrences regarding venereal disease are reported in Scotland and elsewhere in recent periods, as noted by Helen King in a forthcoming book.
29. The spiritual potential of singleness and early Christian thought on virginity are of recent interest to some Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox Christians. See, for example, Wehr, “Virginity, Singleness and Celibacy”; see also the website https://www.singleconsecratedlife-anglican.org.uk.
Evangelical Christians has famously entailed public pledges and events like purity balls to encourage young people to remain sexually virginal until marriage. This requirement is intended for women and men alike, though greater focus tends to fall on the purity of women. In some Evangelical circles, those who have previously lost their virginity can achieve a “renewed” or “secondary” virginity by repenting of illicit sexual activity and committing to premarital abstinence; here God’s forgiveness and redemptive, transformative power make possible the true restoration of virginal purity, regardless of a person’s experiences with sexual penetration. The notion of retaining or restoring virginity on a mental or spiritual level circulates in some Muslim circles as well and can involve similar themes of repentance and forgiveness. During the earlier 2000s, muftis in Egypt weighed in on the permissibility of women seeking hymenoplasty. These highly placed religious authorities defended the practice, claiming that the surgery allows women who repent of premarital sex to enter marriage in a genuinely virginal state and to counter the social double standard for sexual purity: by nullifying a means used to measure women’s virginity alone, their action supports the single standard for sexual purity taught within Islam. Strict expectations for female premarital virginity prompt critics to decry various religious traditions as repressive and oppressive of women, but some girls and women experience the expectations as a means of belonging and as liberation from societal pressure to treat sex casually or display oneself as an object of allure for others’ enjoyment.

30. DeRogatis, Saving Sex, 10–41.

31. For instance, one author writes that “you will never be able to get your virginity back physically, but you can regain it emotionally, psychologically, relationally and spiritually” (Garth, Naked Truth, 143–144). DeRogatis notes that teachings about regained virginity in the United States have been more common among Evangelical adults of color than in resources for teenagers that privilege whiteness (Saving Sex, 129–149).


33. Positive experiences of parental protectiveness and cultural belonging in immigrant communities are considered in Amer, Howarth, and Sen, “Diasporic Virginities.” One example of an author controversially portraying conservative norms as feminist is Shalit, Return to Modesty. DeRogatis analyzes insider perspectives critically in Saving Sex, 38–41; one example of critique coupled with alternative religious possibilities is Gish, “Styrofoam Cup.” Some scholars highlight critics’ own complicity in projects of subject formation and political or theological regulation, such as through a universalizing discourse of individualism and human rights; see especially Mkasi and Rafudeen, “Virginity-testing Cultural Practices” and Vincent, “Virginity Testing in South Africa.”
construal of virginity within religious traditions is yet another area where clashing opinions reveal deeper differences in worldview.

The examples listed here show that female virginity is presently granted great value. Acts of violence and financial transactions that treat virginity as a commodity assert that virgins wield a special kind of power and appeal. Some societies and groups make the stakes of virginity loss very high, such that members may go to considerable lengths to regain lost virginity. Practices that enforce or celebrate virginity become flash points of debate that expose deeper differences. Exploring past virginity discourse provides insight into both the past and the present.

**Historicizing the Significance of Virginity**

The tremendous significance of virginity described above could easily give the impression that a concern with female virginity is built into all cultures worldwide. Yet the valuing of virginity can rise or fall and does not stem from just one root cause. It has been historically and geographically prevalent but not universal; it can be demanded of men as well as women; it can depend on socioeconomic class. Premarital virginity was irrelevant for some of the peoples that anthropologists featured in earlier twentieth-century ethnographies.\(^\text{34}\) Attempts to explain why virginity has mattered appear in multiple fields, with each study contributing useful analysis that can address parts of the global and historical data and illuminate aspects of a larger, uneven and variable picture.\(^\text{35}\)

Concerns with women’s premarital virginity often dovetail with religious commitments, and popular as well as academic discourse closely associates the two. Western scholarship is wont to identify monotheism as a major cause or factor for the valuing of virginity. While virginity has often been treated as socially urgent within monotheistic traditions, concerns with monitoring women’s virginity predate and exceed them. Religion and culture are routinely

---

\(^{34}\) Broude, “Sexual Attitudes and Practices.” As an example of how difficult it can be to determine precolonial practices of indigenous groups, see scholarly disagreements about Aztec life referenced in Jaffary, *Reproduction and Its Discontents*, 20 and 238n1–3.

conflated and inherently difficult to separate analytically, and religious traditions are frequently cited as sources of norms that in fact vary by culture and are not coterminous with a tradition. Sounder conclusions emerge from observing the intertwining of religious actors' projects with the processes of their larger sociological, cultural, and political contexts.

The valuing of female virginity can be affected not only by the spread of new religious traditions, but by other changes. To give modern examples, a study of nineteenth-century marriage contracts from a locale in northern Sudan shows that contemporary values and practices surrounding virginity and marriage are recent phenomena; they reflect a shift in women's role from active participation in economic production to becoming ideal consumers in a rising middle class. Another study suggests that the rise of liberal and capitalist institutions in nineteenth-century Mexico brought about a broader population's adoption of elite colonial values for (virginal) female respectability. Fixation on women's virginity and modesty can reflect new national projects or concerns with state vulnerability. Virginity has become important for many groups' sense of cohesion and cultural survival, including some indigenous, ethnic minority, and immigrant communities. Various changes and challenges impact gender relations and the valuing of virginity, and the intricacies of legal and social virginity discourse can shift in a relatively short span of time.

Scholarly and popular discourse often leaves the origins of recent concepts, ideals, and practices shrouded in the mists of bygone times, creating a false sense of universality and timelessness. The functions named above demonstrate that the value societies or groups accord female virginity is not timeless or fixed. By focusing on ancient conceptualizations of women's virginity and the purposes to which early Christians put them, this book will illuminate

38. See especially Parla, “Honor’ of the State.”
40. Caulfield and Esteves, “50 Years of Virginity.”
new aspects of the vast historical picture of virginity discourse and of early Christian thought.

**AMBIGUITY AND VARIABILITY OF PRESENT-DAY AND ANCIENT VIRGINITY**

*The Ambiguity of “Virginity”*

According to many late ancient Christian theologians, virginity objectively exists and was created by God. From the vantage point of modern discourse analysis, virginity is a socially constructed concept. Even sexual virginity is not a state one discovers in nature, but a state or stage that people collectively invent, experience, and imbue with meaning.

Today’s diverse and changing definitions of sexual activity lead to diverse and changing understandings of sexual virginity. For instance, in studies from North America, participants not only use varying metaphors for virginity and virginity loss but vary widely in their assessment of what counts as having sex.\(^{41}\) Does it require penetration? Of or with which body parts? If it requires orgasm, whose? Does cybersex count? Younger generations are more likely than older ones to consider consent essential to virginity loss. The growing visibility of LGBTQIA+ experiences in research and mainstream discourse prompts cisgender heterosexual persons as well as LGBTQIA+ persons to rethink conventional definitions of sexual initiation. Widespread practice of oral sex and non-penetrative sexual activities further contribute to decentralizing penile-vaginal penetration with ejaculation as the only genuine form of sexual intercourse. Metaphors of loss increasingly give way to metaphors of transition and discovery. Virginity takes many forms as people redefine it for themselves.

In ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern texts, virginity terminology is extremely flexible and does not always focus on sexual inexperience. A female virgin—betulah and ‘almah in Hebrew, parthenos (παρθένος) in Greek, virgo

\(^{41}\) See studies by Carpenter (“Ambiguity of ‘Having Sex’; Virginity Lost) and studies of LGBT perspectives such as Averett, Moore, and Price, “Virginity Definitions” and Huang, “Cherry Picking.” On the problematic privileging of penile-vaginal intercourse in social and medical discourse about heterosexual sex, see Diorio, “Non-coital Heterosexuality.” Academic, popular, and educational discourses alike tend to occlude the experiences of people who identify as asexual (Bogaert, “Asexuality”).
in Latin, *btulta* in Syriac and some other forms of Aramaic—belongs to a category distinct from that of full-fledged "women" based on her age, marital status, sexual status, or reproductive status, sometimes with other requisite qualities. Meanings of "virgin" terms vary not only between societies but within particular time periods, linguistic or cultural groups, and literary collections. For instance, in the Hebrew Bible, the label *betulah* can imply that a woman has never had sex, but it often refers to a young unmarried woman and can even designate a young married one. In near Eastern sources show parallel ambiguities and semantic range across many groups and languages from very early periods, and later Aramaic sources sometimes label as a "virgin" a young wife or woman who has not yet given birth. In ancient Greek literature, virginity terms often convey that young women are unmarried (not simply or necessarily sexually virginal), though in many Classical sources, being a "woman" instead of a "virgin" requires childbearing. In Latin texts, a virgin is sometimes a sexually inexperienced girl or woman whom a man can deprive of virginity, but additional adjectives may be necessary to specify her sexual inexperience; she may be a young wife or mother instead of a marriageable maiden, and a single author or corpus can use definitions in overlapping or competing ways.

Some Mediterranean literature associates special qualities with virgins, such as: 

42. See helpful summaries in Frymer-Kensky, "Virginity in the Bible" and discussions in Wenham, "Betûlāh." Early Christians and Jews debated whether the ‘almah who will conceive and give birth in Isaiah 7:14 is sexually virginal (for Christians, Jesus’s mother Mary) or simply a ‘young woman’; see Kamesar, "Virgin of Isaiah 7:14" and Seidman, Faithful Renderings, 37–72.


44. See Grimal, “L’antiquité grecque et latine,” and Sissa, Greek Virginity and “Hymen Is a Problem.” On childbearing and womanhood see King, Disease of Virgins, 42–48.

45. Chaniotis, “Age of a Parthenos.”

46. Watson, “Puella and Virgo,” and Caldwell, Roman Girlhood, 45–78. Watson observes an increased emphasis on sexual and “physical” connotations beginning around the turn of the millennium (128–132).
as youthful innocence, respectability and citizenship, purity and the potential for sacred service, or an uncivilized nature dangerously free of male control or investment in state interests.47

It is well established, then, that ancient societies constructed various differences between “virgins” and “women.” A “virgin” is not always a “sexually inexperienced girl/woman” but may be a “maiden,” “teenager,” “unmarried woman,” or “young wife.” Those who analyze ancient texts must heed this ambiguity and recognize that early Christians could select from (and add to) a broad palette of meanings and conceptual associations as they developed their own discourse concerning female virginity.

The Variability of Hymen Tissue

Much modern discourse on virginity concerns the hymen, a thin membrane or ridge of tissue that partially lines the opening of the vagina. Many techniques for testing or restoring virginity rely on the belief that this tissue covers some of the vaginal opening and is broken during penetration of the vagina, resulting in light bleeding and pain. According to current biological and medical knowledge, however, hymens are highly variable and behave in unpredictable ways.48 Hymen tissue varies in size, shape, and resilience from person to person and gains or loses elasticity with age, especially at stages like puberty when major hormonal changes occur. Whether hymen tissue is broken or gradually dilated by penetration, remnants stay attached. It has become common knowledge that injuries, tampon use, and athletic activities can in some cases affect or rupture hymen tissue. Less widely realized is the potential of


48. See Standring, Gray’s Anatomy, 128; Sloane, Biology of Women, 29–30; Hegazy and Al-Rukban, “Hymen.” In occasional cases an imperforate hymen completely blocks the end of the vaginal canal, leading to health problems when menstruation begins. While some people’s hymen tissue breaks easily, physicians have occasionally observed elastic or healed hymen tissue appearing intact during childbirth (“Physical Signs of Virginity”; Lee and Liang, “Hymen Re-Formation”).
the tissue to withstand penetration or to heal. These variations make hymen tissue of little value for forensic investigation or assessment of sexual virginity. Its appearance cannot reliably indicate whether vaginal penetration has occurred. While certain injuries from assault or abuse may be clearly evident, tissue that appears “intact” does not preclude sexual violence and penetrative contact; it is extremely difficult to document such evidence without having prior photographs with which to compare results, especially with children, whose genital tissues can appear quite different based on position during examination and the time elapsed since reported incidents. Since some women bleed or feel pain during a first experience with vaginal penetration while others do not, neither bleeding nor the narrowness or tension of the vaginal opening can serve as a measure of sexual inexperience any more than the shape of hymen tissue can. Physicians and biologists have speculated about the evolutionary history of hymens and of similar features in some other mammals, but there is no known function for human hymen tissue; it may simply be a byproduct of growing a vagina.

The variability and diagnostic inutility of hymen tissue helps explain why some past societies appear not to have “believed in” hymens. We will see in chapter 1 that the hymen is conceptually absent in ancient Mediterranean medical sources, despite writers’ keen interest in young women’s genital health and anatomy. Prior to very late antiquity, evidence for belief in hymens is very rare. People could have, see, touch, or medically treat vaginas without thinking of the hymen tissue around their openings as a separate body part or remarkable feature. As Mary Beard illustrates in the article “Did Romans Have Elbows?,” societies view, count, and name parts of the body in diverging,


50. In “Function of the Human Hymen,” Hobday, Haury, and Dayton consider theories and hypothesize that hymen tissue evolved not for a special purpose but as part of the shift to bipedalism among humans’ hominid ancestors. It has been hard for scientists to shake the conviction that hymen tissue must have an evolutionary rationale to complement its immense cultural significance, as seen in outdated arguments about the role of sexual selection in the emergence of hymens (see discussions in R. Smith, “Human Sperm Competition,” 642, and Hobday, Haury, and Dayton, “Function of the Human Hymen,” 172). Some have even linked this emergence with the role of pain in sexual pleasure or childbirth. For brief discussion of these past theories see Holtzman and Kulish, Nevermore, 4–6, and for a recent example Maul, “Evolutionary Interpretation.”
culture-specific ways. Although truths about bodies seem self-evident, they are constructed in the minds, speech, and actions of the people who perceive them.

As chapter 1 will show, modern scholars often take it as a given that ancient groups observed hymen tissue in virgins and could have resorted to gynecological inspection to verify virginity if they had wished. The absence of such a procedure in texts where one expects to find it is thought to require explanation or to constitute an innovative challenge to long-held knowledge about virginity. I argue that we should view the appearance of such practices and ideas, not their absence, as noteworthy and innovative. Rather than assuming that all ancient societies viewed sex organs as current societies do, we should shift the burden of proof and assume that groups were not familiar with the concept of a hymen or the practice of virginity inspections unless sources provide evidence that they were. Shelving modern preconceptions and misconceptions about virginity enables present-day readers to approach the conceptual world of ancient texts more attentively.

Virgin Territory Among Early Christians
The “Territory” of Early Christian Virginity Discourse

The phrase “virgin territory,” beyond exemplifying the pervasiveness of virginity motifs in modern English, signals two things about this study. First, ancient sources treat virginity as I mentioned above—something simply “there” that a person might have, lose, struggle to attain, or strive to make evident. The difference between this vantage point and that of discourse analysis is aptly captured by a distinction between “territory” and “maps” that became common in academic parlance during the twentieth century. Popularized in religious studies by Jonathan Z. Smith’s essay “Map Is Not Territory,” the classic formulation comes from Alfred Korzybski’s work on semantics: “a map is not the territory that it represents.”51 Words, Korzybski explains, are not identical with the objects they represent; our conceptualizations of a thing are not identical with the thing itself. Early Christian writers purport to describe the “territory” or reality of virginity. This study seeks to describe the “maps” they drew to represent it, with special attention to the variety of those maps. My

approach conforms with Smith’s concluding reminder that “maps are all we possess.”

On the other hand, the term “territory” can be understood as more similar to “map” than to “terrain,” making it fitting for this study for a second reason. Whereas Korzybski’s distinction between “map” and “territory” suggests that the latter term is a neutral name for the terrain the map represents, one can also hear “territory” as a charged term that already assumes a process of interpretation and speaks to the relationship between the cartographer and the terrain. The phrase “virgin territory” has a politically fraught history. Europeans colonizing the Americas compared them to a virginal woman and circulated the idea that the land was uncultivated and ripe for the taking; Native American claims could be dismissed if their land was conceptualized as “virgin territory” waiting to be possessed through European colonial expansion. My observation that early Christian writers treat virginity as territory draws attention to the complex interests at stake. The writers claim to reveal new truths about virginity as a timeless reality, sometimes correcting supposed misconceptions, proposing regulations for behaviors, crafting new portraits of the ideal Christian and Church, or charting new terrain in theological reasoning. Authors’ investments and probable intentions cannot be simplistically characterized as purely benign or purely nefarious; they are political and personal, sometimes highly consequential for others, and productive of all manner of resources for self-fashioning and social status that we might judge helpful or harmful within a particular context. What they are not is neutral.

To examine the “territory” of virginity in early Christianity is to examine discourse that is conceptually mutable and politically complex.

Scope and Structure

Studies on virginity in antiquity are becoming plentiful, and studies on early Christian virginity can take various forms. I focus this one on women’s virginity, definitional variety, and the late emergence of the belief that evidence for sexual virginity is built into female anatomy. While some of my sources con-

52. J. Z. Smith, Map Is Not Territory, 309. For further discussion of the use and potential problems of “territory” terminology in religious studies, see Gill, “Territory.”

cern virginity for men as well as women, I leave it to other scholars to investigate constructions of men’s virginity more closely.\footnote{Studies that consider the title “virgin” for early Christian men include Undheim, “Christus Virgo,” and Laes, “Male Virgins.” On New Testament passages setting a precedent for Christian interest in men as virgins and brides of Christ, see Middleton, “Male Virgins, Male Martyrs.”} This study incorporates a wide range of Greek and Latin sources drawn mostly from locales within the Roman Empire, with close attention to available fourth-century Syriac sources and occasional attention to literature in other languages. All translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.

Part 1, “Virginity with and without Virginal Anatomy,” lays out varying ancient assumptions about virginity and women’s bodies in antiquity and demonstrates that an important shift took place in late antiquity. Chapter 1 shows that beginning around the end of the fourth century, female virginity came to be understood on a wide scale as something that is physically perceptible. Whereas prior sources offer non-gynecological methods for testing or proving virginity and portray virgins as fundamentally similar to women in anatomy and to other members of society in their susceptibility to sexual corruption and violence, sources from diverse groups and genres of the late fourth to seventh centuries claim that virgins have noticeably virginal vaginas. Chapter 2 surveys the diverse ways that early Christian writers configured Mary’s virginal status during childbirth. Experiential, reproductive, and anatomical kinds of virginity arise as separate configurations in the second to fourth centuries but frequently converge as her story is retold in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries.

Two central chapters make up part 2, “Christian Conceptualizations of Virginity in the Fourth Century.” While scholars have noted recurring terms and themes across works on virginity from this time, the actual diversity of fourth-century conceptualizations is evident from juxtaposing specific works in detail. I identify significant variations between four authors: Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem of Nisibis, and Ambrose of Milan. Their diverging purposes and presuppositions resulted in divergent configurations; even the meaning of “bodily” virginity is very different from writer to writer.

Part 3, “The Cost of Anatomized Virginity for Late Ancient Christians,” explores the advantages and problems that Christians found as they developed
a belief in the anatomical nature of virginity. Chapter 5 opens with a broad consideration of the effects such beliefs may have had in social arenas like marriage, the sex trade, and the slave trade. Further sections explain the many benefits that the notion of anatomical virginity offered to Christians and the costs and conceptual contradictions that arose as a result. Certain tensions and risks are especially pronounced in the thought of Augustine of Hippo, whose understanding of moral chastity and virginal integrity is the subject of chapter 6. A brief conclusion discusses the persisting synchronic variety and non-linear diachronic developments that characterize ancient virginity discourse across the study. Examination of the overlapping and clashing “maps” of early Christian writers within the larger discursive context of late antiquity will show that virginity remained conceptually flexible and semantically multiple, with unexpected moments of convergence, continuity, contrast, and change as its significance grew.