

GIULIA SISSA : **The hymen is a problem, still. Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome**

The first section of this paper will discuss the semantic field of the Greek words *parthenos* (virgin), and *parthenia* (virginity). More precisely, I will revisit the arguments made in *Le Corps virginal* (1986: Paris: Vrin.), and translated into English, as *Greek Virginity* (1990: HUP). The second section of the paper will advance a new hypothesis on the medical knowledge that lay in the background of the representations of virginity, to be found in different sources. The two sections are connected. While re-examining the terminology, I will argue that ancient medical writers did not include “the hymen”, in the anatomy of a healthy young woman. Soranos of Ephesus (II century CE) was the first physician to mention a membrane obstructing the vagina, but he claimed that this was just a false belief. There could be imperforation, which was an anomaly, but there was no normal occlusion.

The ancient Greeks, therefore, failed to identify what modern forensic medicine calls “the physical signs of virginity”. They relied, however, on a different kind of sign of vaginal intercourse: pregnancy. As long as they could trust the conception of a child as the predictable effect of heterosexual coition, pregnancy revealed the loss of virginity. Contraception was to disturb that trust. Soranos, the first physician who discusses the anatomy of an un-penetrated woman, is also the first to provide an extensive collection of contraceptive remedies – not just abortifacients. The transition from a representation of virginity as sexual inexperience (but without the anatomical support of the hymen) to the need to pin down sexual integrity via a membranous structure, is correlated to the increasing awareness that women might tamper with their bodies, and that heterosexual coition, therefore, might go unobserved.

Mots-clés :

Virginity – virgin sign – legal medicine – hymen – imperforation – contraception – abortion gender