

Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest. Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi + 197. ISBN 978-0-19-517129-7. Hardcover, € 50.69/\$58.50.

- [1] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) a palimpsest is “a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another.” Kim Haines-Eitzen herself refers to that definition in the introduction to her monograph (17) but she enlarges and modifies it slightly. For her the “process ... of layering” (taken from Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* [London: Continuum, 2007], 3) is at least as important. “Textual variants, multiple interpretations of female literary characters, representations of ideal women readers and writers, labels for visual imagery – in each of these cases, the notion of palimpsest illuminates well the process of layering, difference, erasure, and reinscription.”
- [2] Kim Haines-Eitzen does not (primarily or heavily) focus on the question of how much and why “books, almost entirely written and copied by men, rewrote the stories about women ...” (xi). Instead, she asks questions about direct and concrete traces left by women: 1) How much did women actually become active in writing, copying, selling, and lending books? 2) How is the presence of women readers in ascetic literature to be understood? 3) What do text-critical questions tell us about women? 4) Why were women’s names changed in the copying process? 5) And how do debates about the human body find their way into the transmission of Christian literature? In principal, these questions are themes for the two major parts of the book with 1) and 2) underpinning the first part and 3) to 5) the second.
- [3] The book comes with eleven black-and-white illustrations to visualize what Haines-Eitzen is writing about (e.g., details from sarcophagi, a funerary relief, an ivory panel detail, and a Syriac palimpsest). This reflects her aim not to write about the representation of women in narratives but to take archaeological objects seriously as concrete artefacts and witnesses to women’s activities in late antiquity. Of course, there is a preface, a list of abbreviations, a short introduction (3-17), a citation and a general index, and a bibliography. Notes are given in an extra section (135-163) according to chapters and to pages presented in page headers. That seems to be a wise decision given the brevity of the book itself – only 134 pages – and the fluent, narrative style the author employs.
- [4] The latter and the impressive conciseness of Haines-Eitzen’s studies turn this ambitious book into a good read for everybody interested in early Christianity (and the role women played). Nonetheless, this is not a popular treatment of the issues addressed. It is definitely a scholarly book in which the author takes archaeological artefacts seriously, treating them as primary points of orientation for further conclusions. All in all, what Haines-Eitzen has got to say and how she says it keeps you reading on and on until you have finished the book in one sitting. The notes, however, allow further study and provide motivation to plunge into this or that topic on your own.
- [5] Chapter one is about “Women and Books.” Haines-Eitzen deals with topics as follows according to the self-documenting headlines of the subchapters: “Women Writers, Writing for Women: Authors, Scribes, Book-Lenders, and Patrons” (23-38) is a *tour de force* through topics that each could cover a small book on its own. But for her it is important to bring together condensed

knowledge in order to attract attention to and draw conclusions from that knowledge. Of course, readers meet women in papyrus letters, the famous pilgrim Egeria, and owners of libraries or book-lenders. However, the novelty is in the way readers become aware of the various roles women might have played in late antiquity. “Reading, Not Eating: Women Readers in Late Ancient Christian Asceticism” (39-52) deals with an “elderly lady” in *Hermas*, a book thief in *P.Lips.* 43, and exemplary women readers (above all, Gerontius, *Life of Melania*). “Women’s Literature? The Case of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*” (53-64) argues against the stereotypical notion that this is typical women’s literature, being narratives with sensational, adventurous, and, thus, entertaining episodes. Such a notion is discriminatory and cannot be proven by evidence, above all not from and by the texts themselves. To illustrate Haines-Eitzen points to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and its striking attestation by early manuscripts, some of remarkable quality (e.g., *P.Ant.* I 13).

[6] The second main chapter – “Sexual/Textual Politics” also has three subchapters: “Sinners and Saints, Silent and Submissive?” or as its second title tells “The Textual/Sexual Transformation of Female Characters in the New Testament and Beyond” (69-93) is about 1) Eve, Mary the Mother, Mary Magdalene, and a shift of interpretation concerning them, and 2) minor female characters (Mary and Martha, the woman taken in adultery, women in Thessalonica, Junia/Junias, and the silencing of women [1 Cor 14:34-35]).

“First among All Women’: The Story of Thecla in Textual Transmission and Iconographic Remains” (95-112) is about the most prominent and most revered female figure in early Christianity, Thecla, a martyr who survived her martyrdom. Haines-Eitzen refers to early Christian writers, to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and to *The Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*. The Armenian and Syriac versions of her traditions are also telling and a cross-lingual analysis brings forth rather interesting strains of interpretation or reception. Above all, Thecla’s attitude towards books is significant (which Haines-Eitzen also underlines by images). But it is a pity that the interesting gloss for 2 Tim 3:11 naming Thecla explicitly (and, probably, 2 Tim 4:9 together with *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 2) is not mentioned and discussed in detail. This might be another proof for Thecla’s extraordinary position within early Christianity. In addition, there is a striking figure constellation in a Medieval manuscript from circa 1084 (Psalter and New Testament, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Manuscript 3, folio 269v): Paul is sitting on his chair writing to the Romans. Opposite is a male figure and behind his chair, looking over his shoulder, a female figure. These might be Timotheos and Thecla advising him what to write. But this story needs further discussion and study and Haines-Eitzen cannot be blamed for not considering these stimulating issues.

“Contesting the Ascetic Language of Eros: Textual Fluidity in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*” (113-127) is about eroticism and asceticism, which are, of course, popular topics when it comes to discussing the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Without doubt, the *Acts of Andrew* play an important role, too, in which female/male bodies and behaviour are of significance.

[7] In her concluding chapter (129-134) Haines-Eitzen tells at length the story of the discovery of a Syriac palimpsest at St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai. The sisters Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson detect the lives of women saints (eighth century) written over the underlying text of the four canonical Gospels (see figure C.1. on page 132, late fourth to early fifth centuries). This means that

Thecla was written above the Gospel of Mark, Eugenia on top of Mark, Luke, and Matthew, Euphrosyne on top of Matthew and Luke, Pelagia on top of Mark and so on. Basically, this is what Haines-Eitzen introduced as “layers” in the introduction of her book.

- [8] A fascinating book, a very good read, and an intriguing motivation to read and study more about women in early Christianity.

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