Late Antique Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning: Allotting the Scarlet and the Purple. By **Catherine Gines Taylor**. Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 11. Leiden: Brill, 2018. xiv + 240 pp. $212.00 cloth.

Most visitors to major museums of Europe, North America, and beyond will behold paintings of the Annunciation, the biblical scene in which the angel Gabriel delivers surprising news to the Virgin Mary about her miraculous pregnancy (Luke 1:26–38). Among the most depicted of New Testament episodes, the Annunciation's iconography was established with minimal adaptations from the late medieval through modern eras, especially in Western Europe and regions under its influence. In these examples, Mary is listening to Gabriel's message while reading indoors or on a veranda, somewhat passive and receptive in comportment, embodying the *Fiat mihi* ("Let it be done to me . . .") of her acceptance of God's Word (Luke 1:38). Yet the late ancient, Byzantine, and early medieval eras exhibited a much wider variety of artistic types of the Annunciation. Among these earlier versions, two types show Mary not as passive but in action when she meets Gabriel—either drawing water from a well or spinning thread in the process of weaving. Like most "biblical" art, these types of the Annunciation identify and dramatize biblical characters by imagining the world behind the text and between its lines. The Gospel of Luke provides neither setting nor circumstances for the event, and so examples that portrayed Mary outside at a well or inside spinning were no less faithful to the received narrative than were those that showed her reading a book. And each way of imagining Mary's activity (or passivity) had a profound, centuries-long impact on viewers' interpretation of her and, in turn, of archetypes of femininity.

Taylor's excellent and richly illustrated debut monograph—a revised dissertation from the University of Manchester—provides a detailed study of the more prevalent of the two late ancient types that show Mary's activity during the Annunciation: the Virgin Annunciate Spinning. Texts as ancient as the second-century *Protevangelium of James* did narrate Mary's spinning activity—how she participated in weaving the veil of the Jerusalem Temple, the "scarlet and purple" of the book's subtitle. Taylor acknowledges this and other precious textual resources, but she rightly and quickly moves past them to dwell with the images and the objects under consideration, which come mainly from the fifth and sixth centuries. She sees both the texts and the visual cultures of late ancient Christianity as drawing from the Roman social ideals of feminine virtue, arguing from the art that "the role of the virtuous matron, in its seeming mundaneness, was an allotted and holy path that Christian women embraced" (5). Her analysis thus serves as a counterweight to historical scholarship that emphasizes Mary as an ideal of asceticism, of virtuosic renunciation, in late antiquity. Taylor shows how Christians imagined the "mother" side of the "virgin mother" paradox. She "privileges the Christian matron as the unsung participant in holy *paideia* or culture during late antiquity and argues that matronage was used as exemplum for both virginal young women on the cusp of marriage as well as for wives and mothers immersed in the household affairs of daily living" (13).

Through analyses of spinning examples in multiple artistic media, Taylor sets the social scene of Greek, Roman, and Jewish ideals for matrons. She concludes that spinning imagery, whether of the act itself or the tools of spindle and distaff, was "associated

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640720000153 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with social and moral stability . . . capable industry, fertility, chastity, power, even the virtue of *pudicitia* within the Roman household" (58). She then turns to Christian texts about Mary, motherhood, and virginity in order to highlight the continued importance of maternal imagery even during the late ancient era of increased asceticism among women. Responding to the emphasis of scholars such as Elizabeth Clark, Susanna Elm, and Kate Cooper on ascetic practice, she brings forth other examples that show the Annunciate Mary as "a visual case study of how the exception of ascetic celibacy proves the rule of matronly fecundity" (89).

Gold rings from late antiquity which depict the Annunciation on the bezel offer particularly personal, domestic examples of such iconography. Taylor examines these rings and other medallions, armbands, pendants, and pilgrimage tokens that feature the Annunciate Spinning as the "paraphernalia of married fertility" (116). If late ancient artifacts that depicted Thecla were to promote "ascetic renunciation as the preferred path of holy behaviour," so also would these varied objects "underscore and elevate the stature of married women" of the same era (129). She highlights the patronage required to commission expensive images of the Annunciate in silk textiles and sardonyx cameos, "objects that are likely to have been purchased by and for women . . . whose lives were affirmed and sanctified by their traditional roles, so much so that this iconography followed these matrons to their graves" (181).

Indeed, even graves were adorned with imagery of the Annunciation, such as the Pignatta sarcophagus (fourth century, Ravenna) which Taylor explores in detail. Though the identification of all aspects of its scenes is not without doubt, she ventures a compelling interpretation of the sarcophagus's iconographic program: "Viewing the Annunciation image and contemplating mortality could conjure ideas of salvation, redemption, and the miracle of the Incarnation, but it also elevated the daily tasks and roles of women who, in their performance of *imitatio Mariae* in the guise of the new *Magna Mater*, continued to symbolize idealized feminine virtue for Christians and for Rome" (199). Based on the vigor of her analysis of this one sarcophagus and her extrapolations that connect death, burial, and the matronly model of Mary, some readers might be misled to believe that Annunciation iconography was common on sarcophagi of the period—when, in fact, very few examples of scenes from the beginning or the end of Jesus's life are found on Christian sarcophagi at this time. Nonetheless, the connections drawn to spinning iconography on non-Christian or possibly Christian tombstones round out the argument well.

Overall, Taylor provides a trustworthy guide to the imagery and ideals of spinning in the Roman era, especially as adapted into early Christian visual cultures. Her analysis situates a diverse set of objects amid Roman social mores, patristic theology, and contemporary historiography, all while remaining admirably fixed to the details of the artifacts themselves.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640720000153