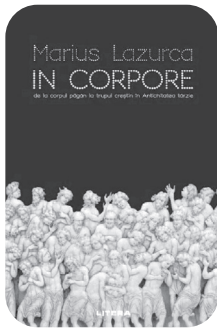


Marius Lazurca, *In corpore. De la corpul păgân la trupul creștin în Antichitatea târzie*, București, Editura Litera, 2022



Abstract: Although corporality has only fairly recently become a topic of interest in the social sciences, Marius Lazurca's extensive study shows how the debate surrounding the body has been essential in the development of the relationship between the deeply rooted Graeco-Roman and the emerging Christian worldviews. The author explains how the body has found itself at the intersection between various discourses, such as philosophy, medicine, law and theology, and how it is key to understanding the significant social and religious transformations taking place in the Early Roman Empire.

Keywords: Body; Corporality; Historical Anthropology; Stoicism; Christianity; Roman Empire; Roman Law.

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FROM *CORPUS POLITICUM* TO *CORPUS MYSTICUM*: THE BODY BETWEEN STATE AND CHURCH IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

How was Christianity possible? This is the question standing at the origin of Marius Lazurca's comprehensive study of the conceptualisation of the body in the first centuries of the Roman Empire. More concretely, the author wishes to investigate how this religious phenomenon evolved from a marginal movement despised as a heretical sect of Judaism to a rival of the dominant Graeco-Roman cultural tradition and an important historical actor in the period of the Early Empire. In his view, the idea of the incarnation is essential for understanding how the new religion has managed to shake the ancient Mediterranean world, since it stipulates that God, a being not limited by spatial or temporal categories, has consciously decided to fully adopt human nature and everything it implies. Consequently, the new Christian concept of the body is the place of convergence between the pre-Christian cultural and intellectual tradition and the new theological and moral doctrine. The title of the book, *In corpore*, synthesises the double nature of the body echoing throughout the entire argument Lazurca presents: on the one hand, it refers to the personal, individual body that works as a guarantee of human existence in space and time; on the other hand, its connotative meaning refers to being part of a group, which means that "body" can also be interpreted as a communal, social reality built on solidarity and interpersonal relationships. The author argues that the first centuries of Christianity meant a mutation from the concept

of having a body to that of being a body, and the whole book can be described as an elaborate demonstration and explanation of this central point.

The study has as a starting point Lazurca's doctoral thesis presented at Paris-Sorbonne University, which has been adapted for a general Romanian audience, suited to the reader who has no expertise on the topic. The book is structured into three parts, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. The introduction focuses on methodological aspects pertaining to the types of texts the author will consult, as well as on some basic socio-cultural coordinates regarding the world of the early Roman Empire. In terms of the methods used, Lazurca's research combines a historiographic approach meant to establish a strongly documented background of the period with an anthropological one focused on the analysis of various cultural processes, behaviours, discourses and concepts. To this end, Lazurca directs his attention towards various types of documents (literary, religious, medical, legal) that include "theories about the nature, functions and meanings of the human body"¹. This wide-ranging scope is meant to show how ideas about corporality can produce mutations in other domains such as ethics, politics, culture, institutions etc. The author starts from two main theoretical assumptions: firstly, that the body is a social object that always finds itself at the crossroads of various discourses and historical realities; secondly, and as a result of the former, that any definition of corporality depends on the cultural and historical context which generates it.

Afterwards, Lazurca describes in broad strokes the Roman imperial world

during the dawn of Christianity. In short, the elites start adopting a new, more austere lifestyle under the influence of pagan philosophy (especially stoicism), a style that is promoted jointly by the medical practice and the new matrimonial legislation starting with the laws promulgated during the reign of Augustus. In addition, there appears a new form of religiosity that creates a split between the individual and society, so that the concept of personal redemption begins gaining traction among the Roman nobility. For this reason, the new culture is one centred on the individual, not the collective, with power being personalised and exercised by a small number of elites. In Peter Brown's terms, the ancient world moves "from an age of equipoise to an age of ambition"². From his perspective, the transition from the dynasty of the Antonines to the reign of Constantine signals a change between two different lifestyles³: the old one focused on the collective and the new one focused on the individual. Lazurca argues that the space in which these changes are the most obvious is the body, generating a new anthropological perspective, which will be detailed in the following chapters.

The first part of the book, "Corpul. Subiect și metodă" ("The Body. Topic and Method"), delves deeper into the various discourses surrounding the body during the period under inspection and the theoretical frame the author adopts, as well as the main empirical instruments of analysis he uses. The first chapter discusses the various influences on the new strain of asceticism typical for the imperial elites of the Early Empire. The most influential philosophical school in this respect is stoicism, which encourages austerity as a way

of aligning oneself with universal reason. According to it, marriage is a necessary act for procreation and for living a life in common with another. The stoics also have an important effect on the new image of the city, which is increasingly seen as a political body. Medicine is another important field that becomes more and more interested in the effects of sexual activities on humans, which leads to important ethical consequences, since it promotes a certain way of life for the nobility. In the realm of law, Augustus' more strict legislation on marriage and adultery has a concrete political purpose, since aspects that had to do with a family's private life are not drawn into the public sphere and becomes an important obligation for nobles in terms of their status as Roman citizens. On the other hand, Judaism and later Christianity see a very strong correlation between celibacy and the prophetic vocation of individuals. The Christian worldview also comes with a more severe perspective on adultery and with a new focus on the reciprocal marital fidelity of the two spouses. All of these ideas will be significantly expanded by the author throughout the remainder of his study.

The second chapter provides a concise overview of the body that has emerged as an object of study thanks to the fields of anthropology and sociology. Lazurca describes the body as a "synthetic image of a world"⁴, since its meanings are historically and socially constructed. According to him, there is an essential difference between 19th century racial anthropology that sees in culture social manifestations of the biological body's features and 20th century social anthropology in which the body "becomes an expression of culture"⁵. He also

discusses the claims of feminist anthropology, according to which corporality is a cultural phenomenon. According to this perspective, masculinity and femininity are historical and social constructs, even if they are built on biological coordinates. However, the author adopts a more moderate position, stating that any culture displays some stable points that change extremely slowly, and that these points are what could be seen as the nature that culture cannot escape from. He emphasises that the ethics of interpretation require one to recognise the tradition one is situated in and that it is impossible for the object of study to be just a discursive invention completely detached from the idea of "nature". As such, the methodological tradition Lazurca is working in is that of "a historical anthropology of the body"⁶.

The second part, "Hermeneutici seculare ale corporalității" ("Secular Hermeneutics of Corporality"), focuses on the pagan, Graeco-Roman view of the body in the first centuries of the Roman Empire from a philosophical, medical as well as legal perspective. By analysing authors such as Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and Galenus, the author highlights how both medicine and stoic philosophy promote spiritual discipline and temperance paired with a control over the body. This association is the result of an analogical way of thinking according to which the relationship between reason and body should mimic that between the ruler and his subjects. The ruling nobility should play at the social level the same role reason plays on an individual, psychological level, that of ruling over passions through restraint and moderation. Thus, the elites are separated from the communal body through education

(*paideia*), but at the same time they are meant to promote the image of the city as a social body through their public conduct. Nevertheless, stoicism does not encourage contempt for the body, since it plays an important role in providing sensorial information for the mind. The problem of the stoics arises when one offers the body more than it deserves. Since it is constantly exposed to violence, it is a source of vulnerability, so that one may also become vulnerable to its weaknesses if one pays too much attention to it (the same problem appears in the case of riches or social status). Consequently, this chapter shows how the body finds itself at the border between a natural, biological and a moral, normative existence, since it is both material and it contains in itself the order conferred to it by reason (*logos*).

The second chapter details how the body and body-related activities were prescribed in the Roman legal system and how they evolved after the advent of Christianity. The author discusses how Augustus' laws on sexual conduct severely condemn adultery and introduce a renewed interest in chastity in the Roman family. Many intellectuals see decency (*pudor*) as an ideal that recovers an ancient Roman model of social behaviour. The new legislature begins the process through which political authorities start to exert influence on matrimonial relationships from an ideological and religious point of view. Adultery and fornication turn into public offences that must be brought before a court, whereas before they would have been settled inside the private domain of the family.

The chapter also presents how the triumph of Christianity complicates matters further, since during the 4th and 5th

centuries there develops a sort of competition between the public morality based on punishment and the religious morality based on forgiveness: the State wishes to expose and publicly sentence adultery, while the Church intends to avoid such scandals so that penitence and absolution would be easier to attain by the sinner. At the same time, the Christian doctrine attempts to generalise adultery as a sin and to make both partners responsible for the well-being of their marriage. For instance, laws promulgated by the emperors Constantine and Justinian are meant to prohibit unilateral divorce and they simultaneously demonstrate how the new religion wishes to determine Roman law to discourage the separation of couples. Thus, the Church becomes a paragon defending public morality and starts actively participating in conjugal matters. The author stresses how the individual body is always associated with a communal body: in Roman legislation the latter is the political body of the City, while in Christianity it is the mystical body of the Church. Therefore, there is a tendency to equate these two forms of the collective body under the more pronounced Christian influence in the latter centuries of the Roman Empire. Thus, the debate on adultery shows how religious and secular authorities attempt to draw a parallel between the unity of the societal body and that of the family.

The third part of the study, "*Hermeneutici religioase ale corpului*" ("Religious Hermeneutics of the Body"), concentrates on the different views of the body in Judeo-Christianity, both in orthodox as well as heterodox religious communities. The sect of the Essenes constitutes the topic of this section's first chapter, which Lazurca

describes as a “phenomenon of contact”⁷ between Judaism and Hellenism, appearing towards the middle of the 2nd century BC, which at the same time represents a “phenomenon of crisis”⁸ revolting against the Hellenisation of Judaism. It is characterized by a dualistic worldview (reflected in its cosmology, eschatology, anthropology etc.) that promotes a separation from the rest of the world and a radicalisation of Judean tradition (which they see as a return to a more pure and archaic form of Judaism). The Essenes perceive themselves as beneficiaries of a divine revelation that has remained hidden to those who have deviated from the correct religious teachings, which turns them into an apocalyptic community (in the etymological sense of the term). As such, for them the communal body should fight against any outside influences that may damage its purity. The author emphasises how the body becomes an instrument used for building a collective identity that establishes the limits between the community and the exterior world (especially through ritual practices, since the theology of the Essenes does not differ greatly from the traditional Judean one). On the other hand, it becomes the object that regulates the norms of the community, which separate it from the contemporary practices of the Jewish people.

In the second chapter, the author analyses Saint Paul’s view of the body by referring to the First Epistle to the Corinthians and, more specifically, to the conflict it implies between the followers of the apostle and the followers of Apollos. Lazurca argues that, as far as it can be ascertained from Paul’s combative strategy, Apollos is a disciple of Philo of Alexandria’s philosophical school (he actually came from

Alexandria to Corinth). According to Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, Philo’s teaching places the difference between the wise and the common man in the body: the former has the capacity to understand the evil in his body and how it can negatively affect his soul, while the latter delights in bodily pleasures. Hence, death is a liberation from the limitations and vices present in the body, so that a bodily resurrection would have no meaning for Philo⁹. In fact, Lazurca claims that in the ancient philosophy of that period the body was generally considered to be divorced from the soul, playing no part in the evolution of the philosopher. As such, two main attitudes developed: an ascetic one, according to which the body had to be subjugated through the strength of the spirit, and a gnostic one, in which the excesses of the body played no role in the process of spiritual illumination, so that man could indulge in them without feeling any remorse.

This second position may have been the one also promoted by Apollos (although Lazurca stresses that it is important to differentiate between his philosophy and what the Corinthians actually understood from it, as well as how they behaved as a result, which is more likely to be what Paul really opposes). The apostle demonstrates that, by following Christ’s teaching, one cannot be the master of one’s own body and, as a result, one cannot indulge in vices without consequences. James D.G. Gunn emphasises that Paul makes “a call not merely for a disciplining of the physical body, but for disciplined social (corporate) relationships”¹⁰. In his definition of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul does not paint the physical body as the opposite of one’s inner being, but as

the actual materialisation of one's person, through which communal ties can be established¹¹. He wishes to combat any tendency of separation from the ecclesiastical body and thus defines the Church as the body of Christ. This idea has not only theological, but also social consequences, since Lazurca notes that this kind of solidarity was virtually unknown in the Graeco-Roman world. As opposed to the political institution of the City, the Church becomes a new, mystical City in which the body of the believer acquires a new, more complete meaning than the pagan body had.

The last chapter of the section traces how the influences of the Montanist movement and of Saint Paul's anthropology are conjoined in the work of one of the most important early Christian thinkers, Tertullian. Montanism is a Christian sect that developed in Phrygia towards the end of the 2nd century AD, sharing many aspects with the Essenes and other Judeo-Christian enkratic communities: an ascetic and apocalyptic religiosity, a concern for sacral chastity, prophetism etc. Like the Essenian movement in its relationship to Judaism, the Montanites did not propose a different theology from that preached by the Christian Church. Instead, they promoted a stricter discipline because they were convinced that through prophetism and asceticism they would return to a more pure and primordial religious condition.

Tertullian, although at first only a more conservative Christian, converts to Montanism due to his conviction that divine revelation organically evolves throughout history and manifests itself in a more severe asceticism, without breaking from the official doctrine of the community of believers. The disagreement between

Tertullian and the Church is a result not only of this harsh discipline of the body he promotes, but also of his impugnement of episcopal authority. He adopts this position because he wished to defend the purity of the Church as the bride of Christ against the conciliatory tendencies of some bishops. Adultery and fornication are for Tertullian irremissible sins that can be forgiven only by God after the sinner, who has been banished from the community, has reached a state of genuine penitence. The author argues that Tertullian's position displays a manner in which various philosophical and religious influences can converge: the stoic asceticism, the strict ethics of apocalyptic movements and Saint Paul's vision of the Church as Christ's body and of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that Tertullian's later texts paint marriage as a form of adultery (although the official doctrine of the Church never adopted such a radical position) shows the dangers present in Paul's expressed preference of celibacy over marriage. In Peter Brown's opinion, the fact that the apostle focuses on the perils of sexual frustration instead of on its capacity to have an "ordered, even warm expression within marriage"¹² has left a negative legacy since it has encouraged viewing marriage as beneficial only insofar as it constitutes a defense mechanism against adultery and other sins of the body. However, Lazurca highlights that, after Christianity becomes an official religion of the Empire, the Church adopts standards of conduct adapted to the capacities of the ordinary Christian, accepting that most believers cannot lead a strict ascetic life.

In the conclusions, the author returns to some theoretical points from the

introduction which are enriched by the data and hermeneutical process presented in the main body of the work. Lazurca starts from the concept of “techniques of the body” coined by Marcel Mauss, who describes techniques as actions that are both effective and traditional. In his view, “[t]here is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition”¹³. As opposed to traditional actions in the field of religion, morality, law etc., what Mauss calls techniques of the body are “*actions of a mechanical, physical or physico-chemical order*”¹⁴ in which one uses one’s body as the primary technical instrument it actually is. From Lazurca’s perspective, Mauss’s theory demonstrates that the body is the connector between nature as a perennial and stable factor and culture, which consists of various constructs (social, ideological, economic etc.) that have the purpose of imbuing the natural with meaning. Although the body is such a space of meaning-making, it finds itself always in the background. The author emphasises that one can access it only obliquely (through issues related to nutrition, family, sexuality etc.) and in a mediated manner (by analysing ideas, gestures and customs). Despite the fact

that anthropology has usually explored exotic spaces and cultures, Lazurca argues that historical anthropology can direct its attention towards the researcher’s own (Western) culture, which requires rethinking and reevaluating its objects of study and its methodology.

In summary, Marius Lazurca has managed to adapt his rigorous research for his doctoral thesis into a dense and informative book written in a style that is neither pedantic nor overly simplified. It manages to shed light on the large horizons opened by a transdisciplinary field such as historical anthropology and how it can help create a complex and nuanced image of a society, with all of its idiosyncrasies and divergent positions. Last but not least, it manages to successfully prove how our present, quotidian and naturalised Western view of the body comes as a result of various overlapping influences, both Graeco-Roman and Christian, that have manifested and still manifest themselves in areas of knowledge as diverse as philosophy, medicine, law and theology, and how corporality is an essential issue that has heavily contributed to the development of various cultural discourses still active and relevant today.

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NOTES

1. Marius Lazurca, *In corpore. De la corpul păgân la trupul creștin în Antichitatea târzie*, Editura Litera, București, 2022, p. 19.
2. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 34.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. Lazurca, *op.cit.*, p. 60.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 70.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 79.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 202.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 203.
9. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul. A Critical Life*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 281.
10. James D.G. Gunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, 1998, p. 58.
11. *Ibidem*.
12. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. 55.
13. Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body", *Economy and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1973, p. 75.
14. *Ibidem* (italics belong to the author).