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MARKED BODIES: SKIN AS COMMUNICATIVE ENTITY IN LATE ANTIQUE HAGIOGRAPHY

CUERPOS MARCADOS: LA PIEL COMO ENTIDAD COMUNICATIVA EN LA HAGIOGRAFÍA TARDOANTIGUA

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the communicative function of the skin. Taking late antique Christian hagiographic texts as a point of departure, the aim is to illustrate the creation of speech codes in Christian communities in the Sassanid Empire and their expression in the hagiographic literature. It focuses on the presence or absence of marks on the skin and, by analysing these references and comparing them, the paper examines how Christian communities in late antiquity constructed systems of meaning around the skin and used them to articulate their religious identity in relation to other religious communities. The Speech Codes Theory developed by Greg Philipsen is of relevance here, helping to elucidate how Christian communities in the Sassanid Empire, embedded in an agonistic socio-cultural, political, legal, and religious context where Zoroastrianism occupied the hegemonic spheres, developed a constellation of specific meanings around the skin that enabled a continuous process of creating, negotiating and defining a message of religious affiliation.

KEYWORDS: Late Antiquity, Hagiography, Speech Codes Theory, Christianity (Sassanid Empire).

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la función comunicativa de la piel, tomando como caso de estudio un texto hagiográfico cristiano escrito a principios del siglo VII en el Imperio sasánida. El objetivo es ilustrar la creación de códigos de habla en las comunidades cristianas del Imperio sasánida y su expresión en la literatura hagiográfica, centrándose en la representación de un aspecto: la presencia o ausencia de marcas en la piel. Mediante el análisis de estas referencias y su comparación con otros testimonios hagiográficos, exploraré cómo las comunidades cristianas de la Antigüedad tardía construyeron sistemas de significado en torno a la piel y los utilizaron para articular su identidad religiosa en relación con otras comunidades. La Teoría de los Códigos del Habla desarrollada por Greg Philipsen es relevante en este caso, ya que ayuda a dilucidar cómo las comunidades cristianas, incrustadas en un contexto agonístico sociocultural, político, legal y religioso en el que el zoroastrismo ocupaba las esferas hegemónicas, desarrollaron una constelación de significados muy específicos en torno a la piel que permitieron un proceso perpetuo de creación, negociación y definición de un mensaje de afiliación religiosa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Antigüedad tardía, hagiografia, Teoría de los códigos del habla, cristianismo (Imperio sasánida).

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1. The skin as a point of departure[1]

> To mark the body of another in the ancient world was to signal that ownership and agency rested not with the one who bore the mark but with the person who imposed it.
>
> Gleason (2001, 79)

According to Emma Bond (2018, 29), the skin acts "as hide, as flesh, as envelope. As imaginary and as archive" and she continues (Bond 2018, 29): "As a canvas or a text that holds the innate possibility to be transformed, to carry personal stamps, symbols or messages". The skin is our point of exchange with the world, "[what] protects us from others and exposes us to them" (Cataldi 1993, 145). More than a barrier, more than a domain that separates the inner from the outer world, the skin acts as a membrane, a porous site that influences and is influenced by the environment (Martínez Rossi 2008). This reciprocity with the world exerts a decisive impact on human relations and cultural expressions (e.g., Ahmed & Stacey 2001; Anzieu 1985; Bond 2018; Fisher 2002; Hoffmeyer 2008; Nedergaard 2016; Strathern & Stewart 1998).

In recent years, skin has become the point of departure for many cultural analyses and this corpus of work has helped define the area known as "skin studies" (see Lafrance 2018, esp. 11-18), which examines the meaning of skin in cultural expressions, and transforms this surface into the central focus of analysis. Thus, skin studies have contributed to our understanding of the expression of self in contemporary societies (e.g., Doss & Hubbard 2009; Koller & Bullo 2019; Hiramoto 2014), group membership (e.g., Fisher 2002; Pritchard 2001), exclusion and opprobrium (Glum 2021), social status (Gell 1993) and religious affiliation (Zwicky 2014). The skin in antiquity has also formed the subject of numerous studies (Béreiziat-Lang & Ott 2019; Burrus 2003; Cordier 2004; Dauge-Roth 2020; Elm 1996; Frank 2000; Gustafson 1997; Jones 1987; Kay 2006; Nyffenegger 2013; Pignot 2019; Walter 2013).

1.1. *Speech Codes Theory*

The skin can be considered a communicative entity, a culturally important site which expresses a comprehensible message around which a group can form. Here, I shall analyse the textual representations of skin in a given community, drawing on the speech codes theory developed by Gerry Philipsen (1992; 1997; 2008).

Speech codes theory refers to "an original theory of human communication as considered from a cultural perspective" (Philipsen, Coutu & Covarrubias 2005, 55). According to this framework, "speech codes are historically situated and socially constructed systems of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules about communicative conduct" (Philipsen 2008). Hence, one of the fundamental pillars of this theory is the spatial and temporal specificity of communicative acts (Philipsen 1997, 124). The theory draws directly on the ethnography of communication, a methodological framework developed by Hymes (esp. Hymes 1964), which considers and analyses the forms of communication specific to a given culture or community. The communicative "code" thus encompasses the representations, considerations, ideas and, in short, the collectively defined

[1] I am grateful to the editor of this issue and to the reviewers whose suggestions have improved and refined this paper.

cultural and communicative parameters that regulate the creation, negotiation and development of a community.

It therefore follows that the various symbolic, semiotic, and moral connotations associated with the skin in late antique and mediaeval Christianity formed part of the vast code of ancient Christianity. Consequently, by examining a communicative code used by Christian communities in a specific historical and spatial context, we can analyse communicative patterns and their role in the formation of a given community.

2. Objectives

The present article focuses on literary representations of skin as a means to instil ideas and motivations in the communities that narrated, transmitted and listened to hagiographic narratives. Such representations were then used by the community as a basis for determining its often agonistic relationship with other religious identities. I aim to demonstrate that a communication code may vary according to the pressures and dynamics of the context in which it was written and may also present internal variations within the community itself, an aspect that is fundamental in the analysis of speech codes (Philipsen 1997, 122).

By collating various texts, my intention is to illustrate the contingency and diversity of the code used by Christian communities, while also demonstrating that this heterogeneity was directed towards a single goal: to develop a religious identity. Afterwards, I will focus on a case study (*Passio* of Shirin, BHG 1637) that allows to narrow the analysis and develop a specific usage of this communicative code that intersects with other aspects such as ascetism and gender.

This paper draws on two broader frameworks of study. The first is the codification of skin in late antique Christian communities and its role in their identitarian cohesion (Cordier 2004; Gustafson 1997; Jones 1987), to which this article contributes new sources and theoretical approaches. The second corresponds to a broader conceptualisation that has been widely explored in religious studies: the importance of the body in religious processes (e.g., Csordas 2002; Ferrándiz 2002; Kuuliala 2020; McGuire 2008, esp. 102f.; Orobitg Canal 1999; Rieger 2020), and, specifically, the relationship in Antiquity between the public nature of representations of bodily aspects and the formation of a religious community (e. g., Kuuliala 2020).

3. The skin as communicative entity: sources[2]

Late antique primary sources depict the skin as a communicative entity capable of serving as an expression of individuality while at the same time forming the starting point for exchange with the world. Walter (2013, 2) has identified this function of the skin in late mediaeval religious literature:

> Skin is thus a multifarious image in medieval culture, both the material basis and figure for forming a sense of self, for understanding the relation of self to the world and to God […]. It is

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author. Text citations follow the reference system accepted by the Corpus Christianorum, where the name of the text is abbreviated in Latin, for example: *Pass. Sir.*, followed by the chapter number in the edition and then, in brackets, the page number and line number in the edition.

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> also a powerful literary and visual image, generating a rich fabric of meanings to be woven or unpicked in medieval textual practices and hermeneutics. The material surface for inscribing words, skin itself […], is a text to be read and interpreted.

The marked body as a communicative entity is already evident in the New Testament, where marks on the members of the tribes of Israel served as a sign that identified the chosen ones (Rev. 7: 4; Rev. 14: 1)[3], while the marks of the antichrist functioned as an element of exclusion and condemnation (Rev. 13: 16-17; Apoc. 14: 9-11). On the other hand, archaeological remains such as Roman statues marked with Christian crosses — albeit most present very dubious characteristics as to their execution and chronology (see Brown 2016) — implied a conceptualisation of the skin as a malleable medium on which to write[4]. A second century author, Justin Martyr (*Apol.* 1, 55. 4-5)[5] conceived of the human face as a surface from which meanings could be extracted:

> And the human form differs from that of the irrational animals in nothing else than its being erect and having the hands extended, and having on the face extending from the forehead what is called the nose, through which there is respiration for the living creature; and this shows no other form than that of the cross. And so it was said by the prophet: 'The breath before our face is the Lord Christ'.

Setting his account in the conflicts between Rome and Persia, Lactantius (*De mor. Per.* 5 [102, 6/12]) tells the striking story of what the Sassanid king Shapur I (r. 240-270) did with the skin of the emperor Valerian:

> But after he had ended his shameful life in such ignominy, he was flayed, and his skin, stripped from the flesh, was dyed crimson and placed in the temple of the gods of the barbarians in remembrance of such a momentous triumph and to serve our legates as a sign that the Romans should not place too much trust in them [*sc.* the Persians], for they could see their captive emperor's skin flayed by their gods.

A similar story is told by the hagiographer of Pigmenius about Julian (*Pass. Pig.* 6 [263]):

> At the same time, war with the Persians broke out against the emperor, who journeyed to Persia. During his journey [...], Julian the emperor was captured and flayed alive from his head to his toenails. And, in the same place dyeing it crimson, seven Persian kings boasted of sitting on his skin while they had peace. Thus, it was that the body of he who in life had mistreated the bodies of the saints was similarly punished on earth while his soul, deserving of it, would suffer condemnation in hell.

His skin, stripped from his body, acts as a sign of opprobrium towards the Romans. Moreover, the author of the martyrdom of Pigmenius considers this a deserving punishment for Julian in return for his actions towards the Christians. In short, the skin is an entity with its own language and codes which, however varied, can be read and interpreted by others. The Christian

[3] For the New Testament text and references, I follow Nestle & Aland's edition. See Nestle *et al.* (2012) in primary sources.

[4] See also Kristensen's (2009) interesting conceptualisation of Christian attitudes towards Roman statues, to which this study can make a significant contribution.

[5] Cited in Squire (2016, 222). For an analysis of the metaphorical meaning of the face in Paul's letters, see Barton (2015).

communities not only based their religious identity on these codes but also used them to construct their relationship with other identities.

3.1. *Martyred bodies as communicative entities*

The idea of the skin as a legible medium proved a very fertile ground in Christian hagiographies. In order to analyse the various representations of marked skin, here I shall present several sources in which the skin and its markings or lack of them are decisive in communicating a Christian religious affiliation. It is important to note that I have deliberately selected a range of diverse testimonies with the intention of illustrating variations in the communicative code of late antique Christian communities. What I wish to highlight here is the way in which Christian hagiographic sources transformed the skin of martyrs and saints into a public statement inserted within the framework of religious identity.

The different reactions of the martyrs' bodies to the extreme physical torture they endured formed an essential element in the expression of ideas of identity. According to Augustine (*Civ. Dei* 22.19)[6], the mutilated bodies of the martyrs became the fundamental sign of the eternal glory that awaited Christians after death:

> In that kingdom we want to see on their bodies the scars of the wounds which they [*sc.* martyrs] suffered for Christ's name; and see them perhaps we shall. For in those wounds […] the beauty of their valour will shine out, a beauty *in* the body and yet not *of* the body […]. In that new age the marks of glorious wounds should remain in those immortal bodies, for all to see.

This last sentence is clear: "For all to see". The martyrs' wounded bodies transmitted a distinctive message that was primarily addressed to the community. Tertullian (*Mart.* 5, *PL,* vol. 1, col. 626B)[7] also praised the aesthetic quality of the scars marking the martyrs' bodies. As we shall see in this section, on occasion these scars became the defining element of martyrdom, the sign of the tortured person's religious affiliation and the glory that awaited this individual after death.

3.2. *The uncorrupted skin*

In the sixth century, Evagrius Scholasticus visited the tomb of Simeon the Stylite (*HE* 1, 21-14). Located within this marvellous shrine — described in detail by Evagrius (*HE* 1, 24-25) — and accessible to the faithful, was the head of Saint Simeon together with an iron chain. What Evagrius found remarkable was that even though the head had been severed from its body, the hair and face retained their vitality. Moreover, despite being wrinkled and dry, the skin of the saint's forehead was uncorrupted and the head in general was that of a living person (*HE* 1, 24). What is relevant in this scene to my analysis is the message understood by Evagrius and, above all, by the faithful who fervently visited the tomb (*HE* 1, 23)[8]:

> And the extraordinary thing was that the hair on his head was not corrupt [οὐ διεφθάρησαν] but preserved as if he were still alive and in contact with people. The skin on his forehead was

[6] Quoted in Frank (2000, 514).

[7] Quoted in Lorenzo-Rodríguez (2020, 15 n. 22).

[8] The theft of relics was, of course, commonplace, as Evagrius himself admits (*HE* 1, 24). See Whitby (2000, 38 n. 134).

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> wrinkled and dry, but still intact, as were his teeth, except for those that had been violently removed by the hands of the pious. His appearance proclaimed how great and how much Simeon the man of God had become.

The incorruptibility of the skin also serves as a public statement in another testimony, in this case somewhat more obscure as to its date of composition, but very interesting for its treatment of the subject under discussion. The *Vita* of Elias of Heliopolis (*Pass. El.*) is a hagiographic testimony written in Greek by an anonymous author in Syria-Palestine. Although the exact date of its composition is unknown, the testimony was probably written around the 9th or 11th century (McGrath 2003, 89). However, the time of the martyrdom of Elias is known: the end of the eighth century (McGrath 2003, 88)[9]. According to the story of this young martyr's life, a quarrel with a rival leads the latter to denounce him to the *eparchy*[10] as an apostate (*Pass. El.* 11). But Elijah refuses to renounce Christianity for Islam and defies the *eparch*. The judge orders him to be stripped and flogged. Naked, Elias is beaten with leather straps until he begins to bleed (*Pass. El.* 11). Faced with the martyr's continuing refusal to renounce Christianity, the enraged judge orders that iron chains be tied to him and that he be dragged to prison, causing "the ground to scrape the wounds caused by his earlier whipping from head to waist, and stripping his tender, youthful skin" (*Pass. El.* 12). With his body broken, Elias endures several periods in prison, interrogations, and further torments (*Pass. El.* 12-19). Finally, before a court, the judge brings out several men with swords and orders one of them to slice off his shoulder. After this, Elias prostrates himself and stretches out his neck, which is severed from his body after the third blow (*Pass. El.* 20). As the martyr lies on the ground, a man who had not witnessed the execution approaches (*Pass. El.* 21):

> When [the man] heard that he had died for his faith, he was surprised. Wanting to know what he looked like, he bent down and, grasping the saint's hair, lifted his face and turned it towards himself. He beheld the face of the saint as if it were still alive and very radiant [ἔκλαμπρον πάνυ]. Sighing, he said, "It is a great thing to die for one's faith. He is not dead, he lives".

Despite a flayed body and a severed arm, Elias' face remains alive and radiant —a notion of the body as something incapable of concealing its power that will be addressed in other texts, such as the *Passio* of Golindouch, explored below in this article—. Following his brutal execution, Elias' body is placed on a cross. Again, a very bright light surrounds the saint's body, arousing the admiration of the Christian faithful (*Pass. El.* 22). In light of the consequent commotion, the judge orders Elias' body to be thrown on a fire, but this meets with no success despite several attempts (*Pass. El.* 25) and no matter how much firewood is thrown on, the martyr's skin remains intact. Eventually, the executioners tear his body to pieces which they cast into a nearby river (*Pass. El.* 25).

Bodies unharmed after torture, such as that of Elias, are a common feature in Christian hagiographic testimonies, one of the best known being the martyrdom of Polycarp (*Pass.*

[9] Although beyond the scope of this paper, the interest of this testimony resides in the choice of subject matter and language for communities where Arabic had already displaced Greek and which were under the political, legal and administrative influence of Islam. For an introduction to the text and its interesting compositional context, see McGrath (2003, 85-90).

[10] A term used in the Byzantine Church to designate the subdivision of a diocese. However, the *eparch* appears in the text as an Arab. This is of course incorrect, but as McGrath (2003, 97 n. 44) points out: "The Byzantine term *eparch* is inappropriate for a Muslim official but suggests someone who had supreme judicial and perhaps administrative duties in the city of Damascus".

Pol. 15-16 [333-334]). In others, such as the *Passio* of Basil of Amasya, the saint is beheaded and his remains thrown into the sea, only to reappear, united and intact, in his hometown (Peeters 1944, 87). In the 13th century, other testimonies such as that of Margaret, who was swallowed by a dragon but emerged from its belly without so much as a scratch (see Nyffenegger 2013), or that of Christina Mirabilis (see Spencer-Hall 2017), who died and was resurrected three times with her body intact, are evidence of the widespread nature and persistence over time of this code.

Some hagiographies claimed that earthly torture did not affect the bodies of the Christian saints. Even after undergoing extreme violence such as that endured by Elias, their skin would remain uncorrupted even after death. However, this was not always the case. Rather, the wounds produced by violent torture were more commonly viewed as a fundamental sign of martyrdom and of eternal glory after death.

3.3. *Mutilated skin*

It is time to look at the other side of the spectrum: mutilated skin. As seen earlier in Augustine's testimony, wounded skin served as the fundamental sign of martyrdom in some hagiographic testimonies. In the ninth century, an admiring Eulogius of Cordoba enthusiastically touched the wounds inflicted on Flora by being whipped around the head, leaving the top of her head raw (Lorenzo-Rodríguez 2021, 21 n. 47). Lacerated skin becomes an irrefutable sign of martyrdom. Perpetua's attitude in arena is a defining example (*Pass. Per.* 20 [122, 7/9]):

> She awoke as if from a dream [...], looked around and said to everyone's surprise: "When are they going to throw us to the wild cow or whatever else awaits?" And on hearing that it had already happened, she at first refused to believe it until she saw marks of violence on her body and dress.

Eulalia's words as she is being wounded are also a key example of the meaning attributed to mutilated skin in martyrdom. For the martyr, they become the words of God written on her skin (*Pe.* 3 [140, 136/140]):

> "You are writing on me, Lord! / How happy I am to see these letters / that testify, Christ, to your victories! / Your sacred name proclaims it / the very crimson of the blood that is shed".

The written bodies of the martyrs are of particular relevance in Prudentius and have been explored in depth by Ross (1995), but here I am interested in highlighting the value of Eulalia's body as a communicative entity capable of conveying a concrete message to those who read it.

Another paradigmatic and well-known case is that of Macrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa[11]: just before covering his sister with a shroud, a nun interrupted Gregory and showed him "the saint's greatest miracle" (*Vit. Mac.* 31, [242, 6-7]). As the nun brought the lamp closer to Macrina's body, Gregory saw a "barely perceptible" scar on her breast (*Vit. Mac.* 31 [242, 9]). This small scar was all that remained of a malignant tumour. Macrina had decided that none should see her body and that she would endure the cancer (*Vit. Mac.* 31 [244, 20]), but one day she decided to enter the church and prostrate herself before the altar. Uttering lamentations, she daubed her

[11] On this episode and the relevance of Macrina's skin in the elaboration of her sanctity, see the interesting studies by Burrus (2003), Frank (2000) and Giannarelli (1980, 34-43).

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breast with the mud formed by her tears as they fell to the ground. She then asked her mother to make the sign of the cross on her hand, and when she placed it on her breast, the tumour had disappeared (*Vit. Mac.* 31 [244-246]). This faint scar is transformed into a fundamental sign of divine intervention (*Vit. Mac.* 31 [246, 34/37]):

> This small mark, she said, appeared in place of a dangerous tumour and I believe it will remain until the end, as a reminder of divine intervention, a sign and a continuing reason for giving thanks to God.

The appearance of the scar on Macrina's skin is crucial to demonstrating the power of the Christian faith. "Gregory provided a scar where the story demanded none", Frank (2000, 529) argues, "so that readers could have a 'gathering place' at which to assemble and cue the memory of Macrina". Furthermore, this scar made it possible to "insert Macrina into a long tradition of the saintly wounded" (Frank 2000, 514).

3.3.1. Porous bodies emanating power

My final example is somewhat unfamiliar, but at the same time definitive: that of Golinduch, a Persian martyr whose hagiography is preserved in Greek (*Pass. Gol.*[a]) and in a later Georgian version with slight variations (*Pass. Gol.*[b])[12]. Golinduch's death at the hands of the Sassanid authorities is a key episode in understanding the role of wounds in martyrdom narratives. Once she had been captured, a kind of noose, a "seal" [σφραγίς], was placed around Golinduch's neck[13]. However, the Sassanid jailer freed the saint and allowed her to go wherever she wished. Saddened at not receiving the palm branch associated with martyrdom, she was visited by an angel who asked her the reason for her anguish. The scene deserves quoting at length (*Pass. Gol.*[a] 16 [164, 10/25]):

> The angel appeared and asked her: "Why are you so sad? […]". She answered him: "because I have not been worthy of a blow from the sword or to die a martyr". He said to her: "I can fulfil your wish". He indicated a sword and commanded her stretch out her neck, saying: "Now behold as I cut off your head" and he energetically performed the following: the angel swung the sword against her neck, and it [*sc.* the sword] made a cut. Having been thus struck, her blood began to flow, from her resolve, from her garment. She was clothed in blood, and those who looked on her saw this and rejoiced. From that moment on, many of those who were afflicted with various diseases were healed by touching her and her garment. For the angel had also told her of this when he struck her, that "your bloodstained garments will work many cures". Unmistakable signs [τὰ τεκμήρια] also appeared of the cut on her neck.

This scene is highly complex because of the many references it contains. The garment with healing powers draws on the New Testament scene in which a woman suffering from an issue of

[12] See Peeters (1944) for a narrative analysis of the testimonies. Evagrius Scholasticus *(HE* 1, 6, 20-21 [235-238]) provides the earliest surviving reference to the saint (Peeters 1944, 76). An interesting aspect that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article is the alleged relationship between this martyr and Shirin, martyred under Husraw II. The *incipit* of Shirin's text observes that they are "related" [συγγενίδος] (*Pass. Sir* [112]). See Devos (1994, 10-11) for an analysis of this relationship.

[13] This noose, literally "seal" [σφραγίς], seems to have been a common legal procedure among the Sassanids, according to the testimonies of Shirin (*Pass. Sir.* 17 [124, 26]) and Golinduch (*Pass. Gol.*a 11 [433]).

blood touches the garment of Jesus and is healed (Mt. 9, 20/22; Mk. 5, 25/34; Lk. 8, 43/48)[14]. A similar scene occurs in the *Passio* of Shirin (*Pass. Sir.* 5 [116, 5/6]): the future martyr falls ill because she has not confessed her Christian faith, but she approaches a Christian priest in the city, touches his garment and is cured. The capacity of Golinduch's lacerated skin is easily understood under the light of this New Testament episode.

To understand the powers of lacerated skin issuing blood, I shall turn to the excellent analysis by Moss (2010). Examining this episode in Mark, Moss proposes viewing the bodies of Christ and the woman as porous. Following a thorough analysis of body models in antiquity, she demonstrates that the body could be conceived as "porous" in ancient medicine and thus prone to contamination by malignant external agents (Moss 2010, 513):

> The surface of the body was not a sealed boundary; it was a permeable membrane through which manifold hostile objects could enter the body and wreak havoc in it. Correspondingly, attempts to prevent or alleviate disease are concerned with patrolling the body's borders, avoiding pollutants, and purging invaders. Boundaries must be regulated and checked and invaders must be fended off. Sickly bodies were those that failed in this effort to remain impermeable. They were porous, and it was this porosity that permitted a daimon or other agent to enter and contaminate the body.

The skin could therefore be penetrated by external agents that might cause disease or contaminate the body. However, a key part of her analysis is her observation that this notion can be turned on its head in situations where some divinities take on human form (Moss 2010, 518):

> Porosity was viewed positively in the context of ideas about divine beings concealing themselves in human form. The epiphany motif, the idea that gods travel the earth in disguise as human beings before revealing themselves in displays of greatness, was a well-established convention of Greek mythology […]. The human shells that the deities inhabited in disguise could barely conceal their divine brilliance and glory […]. The woman's response to Jesus may add further weight to this reading. Following her healing, the woman approaches Jesus with fear and trembling (φοβηθεῖσα καὶ τρέμουσα). This response is [..] the standard biblical response to a theophany. It is also, in Greek mythology, the appropriate response to the epiphany of a god or goddess. It may well be, therefore, that some readers interpreted Jesus' porosity as another clue to his concealed identity.

Golinduch's body literally emanates power when cut. Once her skin has been split open, the martyr's divine power infuses everything she touches. The blood that emanates from Golinduch's body is thus firm evidence of her relationship with the divine and of the power she contains thanks to her faith. In addition, the marks on her neck are further evidence of the divine power radiating through her battered skin. As with Perpetua, Eulalia, Flora and Macrina, albeit in a more complex manner, Golinduch's scars insert her into the communicative fabric of ancient Christianity. Their broken, bleeding, porous, malleable skin serves them all as a mark of identification for the community, demonstrating their holiness, while also functioning as a public declaration of Christian faith.

[14] For an analysis of the socio-cultural context of this passage and the most recent literature review, see Shaw (2020, n. 2; n. 3).

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4. Case study: the *Passio* of Shirin (BHG 1637)

The *Passio* of Shirin[15] is a hagiographic text written in Greek in the early seventh century at Karka d-Beit Slok — present-day Kirkuk, Iraq — in northern Mesopotamia. I have chosen this text as my case to study to illustrate how the specific usage of communicative codes around the skin can develop in less common ways and, above all, can intersect with other aspects, such as gender and ascetism.

The text gives no details about its composition but does refer to Husraw II (r. 590-628) as being the "present king of Persia" (*Pass. Sir.* 1 [112, 5/6]), implying that the testimony was written in the early seventh century. According to the text, Shirin was born into a Zoroastrian family that belonged to the local aristocracy of Karka d-Beit Slok, and she died in the 28th year of the reign of Husraw I (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [113, 20]), i.e., between 12 July 558 and 11 July 559 (Devos 1946, 113 n. 1).

The text is probably based on a collection of previous testimonies[16] and narrated by a fellow citizen of the martyr (Devos 1994, 13). Shirin's story is as follows: instructed from birth in Zoroastrianism on her parents' express command (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [113-144]), Shirin keeps her inclination to Christianity a secret until the age of eighteen, at which point "she is able to distinguish right from wrong" (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [114, 17])[17] and publicly announces her conversion. After this, she is imprisoned (*Pass. Sir.* 10-16 [118-124]) and moved to Holwan in the Zagros Mountains. The Sassanid authorities then take her, along with another retinue of Christian prisoners, to Dastagerd, a town near Ctesiphon, where she receives her death sentence (*Pass. Sir.* 22-23 [127-128]). Eventually, Shirin is strangled to death (*Pass. Sir.* 26 [129-130]) and her body is thrown to the dogs[18]. Later, some Christians recover it intact (*Pass. Sir.* 27 [130]) and a bishop called Bateos (*Pass. Sir.* 27 [130, 25]; see Devos 1946, 108-110) takes charge of the body and moves it to Beit Arbai, near the region of Beit Garmai (*Pass. Sir.* 28 [130, 30/31]). He then founds a shrine —εὐκτήριον [...] οἶκον— in her honour, where he deposits her corpse (*Pass. Sir.* 28 [130, 30/31]). There, "the faithful from all around [πολλαχόθεν] gather and honour Shirin's memory every day" (*Pass. Sir.* 28 [131, 3/5]).

4.1. *Communicating religious identity through the body*

After publicly renouncing Zoroastrianism before her family, Shirin was arrested, placed in chains and imprisoned for several days. There, deprived of food and drink, she was subjected to various forms of torture and fell ill (*Pass. Sir.* 11 [119]). When she refused to renounce Christianity, the Sassanid authorities released her from prison and led her before the *mobad*[19].

[15] On the date of composition, the author and the only manuscript that preserves this account — the *Codex Laurentianus* IX, 14 (2r.-18v.) — see Devos (1946, 87-93).

[16] See, esp. "Moses, Elijah, Peter the apostle and other saints appeared clearly to her, as told at length in other testimonies about her [καθάπερ τοῖς κατὰ πλάτος περὶ ἀυτῆς συγγεγραμμένοις ἐμφέρεται]" (*Pass. Sir.* 13 [121, 11/14]).

[17] Personal reflection is frequently mentioned in the account: "everyone has the ability to distinguish what is beneficial" (*Pass. Sir.* 12 [120, 13/14]) and: "My ability to think has led me to entrust myself to the Christians" (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [121, 1]). On this aspect, see Devos (1946: 89).

[18] Corpse exposure is relatively common in Eastern hagiographies, but often presents ambiguous characteristics and lacks homogeneous features. For an extensive analysis of this aspect, see Francisco (2016, 214-226).

[19] The *mobad* was the name given to a Sassanid religious authority (Wikander 1946). For the etymology

Once all the *magi* [μάγοι][20] in the region had assembled, Shirin was questioned about her conversion. The dialogue, quoted at length, is as follows (*Pass. Sir.* 12 [120, 17/33]):

> The angry *mobad* said to her: "If you do not obey, you will suffer repeated torture". But placing her hand at her throat, she boldly answered [μετὰ παρρησίας]: "this [*sc.* her neck], you have the power to cut [τοῦτον ἐξουσίαν ἔχεις ἀποτεμεῖν]. Look! I offer it to you [ἰδού σοι τοῦτον ἐκδδέδωκα]". And for most of the time he was questioning her, she was singing psalms.
>
> Hearing that she was singing, [the *mobad*] asked: "What is she saying?" And when some people told him that what she was saying was Christian doctrine, [the *mobad*] sent for a priest, with the intention of finding out if what she was saying was indeed Christian doctrine. When the priest arrived, he was terrified of the *magoi*. When Saint Shirin saw this, she said to him: "Do not be afraid, father, for remember what the scripture says: 'I bore witness to you before kings and was not ashamed' (Ps. 119, 46) and also: 'fear not those who kill the body but cannot destroy the soul' (Mt. 10, 28)". Then the priest confirmed that what she was saying was indeed Christian doctrine.

There are two key elements in this episode: Shirin's challenge by offering her neck to the Zoroastrian priest and the quotation from Matthew referring to the corruptibility of the body. The New Testament quotation is again repeated in the moment before the martyr's execution. After further interrogation, Shirin is stripped of her clothes and the authorities expect her to show shame. However, her response serves as a strong rebuttal (*Pass. Sir.* 23 [127, 29/35]):

> And he asked her: "Don't you feel ashamed now?" Saint Shirin replied: "Why should I be ashamed? I have neither stolen nor fornicated nor committed any other evil. Indeed, just as you have stripped me of my outer garments, I have, from my master [παρὰ τοῦ ἐμοῦ δεσπότου], vestments better than these. That is why I have undressed and remain firm. He said: 'fear not those who kill the body but cannot destroy the soul'" (Mt. 10, 28). When she said this, the priest, stunned by her words, fell silent.

Her responses indicate that Shirin conceives of her own body as perishable, fragile and of little worth. Her defiant offering of her neck forms another piece in this framework in which the body becomes something malleable, corruptible, and finite. However, this finitude gives way to eternal glory, to something whole, which is achieved precisely through the destruction of the body. Thus, through this code, Shirin is able to articulate her responses to the Zoroastrian priests and generate a series of ideas, motivations and conceptualisations for the audience hearing this story. Nevertheless, despite Shirin's emphasis on the fragility of her body, the story also shows that her body remains unchanged despite torture and punishment. This is a very specific notion anchored in numerous cultural codes, but before looking in detail at the incorruptibility of Shirin's body, I wish to examine another aspect that does indicate — albeit not explicitly — the possibility of marked skin.

of the term and references, see De Jong (1997, 394-395). Shirin's testimony shows that the *mobad*, although an important authority, was subordinate to — or at least could not make certain decisions without consulting — another official, the *rad* (*Pass. Sir.* 13 [121, 19/29]). Based on mention of the various offices of the *mobad* in the *Life* of Mar Yazidpanah, Gignoux (1980, 202) establishes an internal hierarchy between *mobadan* and an external hierarchy between the *mobad* and the *rad*, in which the former cannot make decisions independently of the latter, especially concerning the death sentence.

[20] This is the name given in the text to the members of the Zoroastrian communities.

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4.2. Sphragis: *marked bodies and authority*

Before imprisoning Shirin, the Zoroastrian authorities place a 'seal' around the martyr's neck: "σφραγίσαντες τὸν τράχηλον αὐτῆς" (*Pass. Sir.* 17 [124, 27/30]). The metaphorical meaning of this action — which according to this testimony (*Pass. Sir.* 17 [124, 26]) and that of Golinduch (*Pass. Gol.*[a] 11 [433]), was a common Persian custom — will be highly relevant to this analysis.

The word *sphragis* [σφραγίς] has a specific meaning in the communicative codes of early Christianity (Hjort 1993). A *sphragis* is a mark, a physical seal, that is imprinted on bodies. The physical quality of this seal arises from its metaphorical association with the branding of livestock. In the words of Quasten (1946, 6, cited in Peppard 2016, 59)[21]:

> To be baptized meant to be stamped with the indelible mark of the name of Christ. And since baptism meant the designation of a human being as God's property, this figure of the branding of animals was borrowed from contemporary custom, and baptism was called *sphragis*.

Many sources speak of *sphragis* in reference to baptism, associating it with the branding of livestock by the owner, especially in eastern Christian literature (Peppard 2016, 104-109). In this case, it conveys a message of belonging and its markings are signs of ownership. Eulalia's exclamation before the executioner clarifies this conceptualisation (*Pe.* 3 [140, 136/139]): "You are writing on me, lord! / How happy I am to see these letters / that testify, Christ, to your victories!". The meaning of Eulalia's statement is unmistakable: the marks on her skin do not belong to her, but to God. Hence the quotation with which I introduced this article: "to mark the body of another in the ancient world was to signal that ownership and agency rested not with the one who bore the mark but with the person who imposed it" (Gleason 2001, 79).

Marked skin acted as a communicative entity that transmitted a message of belonging. In antiquity, marking the skin was particularly closely associated with punishment (Jones 1987, 147-150), but Christianity re-semanticised these dermal marks. As Gustafson (1997, 100-101) explained in his influential article,

> Those [*sc*. Christians] who had been so marked and then were able to return to their own communities were often treated as heroes, courageous models in the flesh […]. And so, what had been a mark of crime and punishment, of ignominy and disgrace, of degradation and subjection to earthly power, was intentionally (or sometimes not so intentionally) transformed into a sign of glory and honor, of integrity, of holiness, of the victory of divine power, and of brazen testimony to what may, in some cases, still have been a hazardous choice.

He concludes (Gustafson 1997, 101): "It was a reminder of vows taken and blessings received, and, among those who shared it, a lasting mark of solidarity and of protection under God and Jesus Christ". In this process, the locus of power does not disappear, but shifts. It is now God who is the master that inflicts wounds on skins and these skins serve as a common element of differentiation for Christian communities. As a physical sign inscribed on the body, the *sphragis* thus acts like a brand on an animal's hide, as the sign of God on the skin of Christians. The

[21] I thank Juan A. Álvarez-Pedrosa for providing me with this reference. See Ferguson (2009, esp. 485ff.) for the manifold meanings of *sphragis*.

conclusion I would draw is that, although not explicitly stated, the "seal" placed on Shirin's neck may have left some kind of mark on her skin, but only because the narrative development suggests that this mark is the sign of initiation and belonging to the Christian community. The reason for this supposed mark will be better understood by analysing the absence of marks on the martyr's skin.

4.3. *Absence of marks*

Let us return, then, to Shirin's unmarked body, which has survived unscathed by torture. Immediately after her public rejection of Zoroastrianism, the young woman is put in chains (*Pass. Sir.* 12 [120, 4/7]), locked up in the house and chained again hand and foot in prison (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [122]). To this punishment are added iron weights, her neck is bent towards her feet, and she is thrown into a pit without light, food or water (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [122, 15/19]). Faced with her continued refusal to renounce Christianity, the Zoroastrian authorities send the martyr to the king and "place a seal around her neck, according to their standard custom" [σφραγίσαντες τὸν τράχηλον αὐτῆς κατὰ τὴν παρ ' αὐτοῖς κρατοῦσαν συνήθειαν] (*Pass. Sir.* 17 [124, 27/30]). After pronouncing her death sentence, the authorities decide not to behead her as they had originally intended (*Pass. Sir.* 21, 126]), but to kill her by strangling her with a rope tied around her neck [σχοινίῳ αὐτὴν ἀποπνίξαι] (*Pass. Sir.* 26 [129, 26/27]). Once she has died, her executioners decide not to cut her corpse into pieces, but instead throw it to the dogs, which also leave it intact without tearing it to pieces (*Pass. Sir.* 27 [130, 10/15]). Eventually, some Christians manage to retrieve Shirin's intact body and build a shrine in her honour (*Pass. Sir.* 28 [130; 131]).

I detail all these episodes because they all make one thing clear: logically, all the punishments Shirin undergoes would lead to the mutilation of her skin. However, although this is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the text, Shirin's body remains unscathed by the torture the Zoroastrian authorities inflict on her. Her insistence on the corruptibility of the body seems, *a priori*, opposed to the development of the narrative. However, these communicative codes are embedded in a much deeper web of meanings that explains this apparent contrast: Shirin paints a vivid contrast between the body as malleable and finite versus the soul as eternal and indestructible.

4.4. *Malleable and indestructible bodies*

Cobb (2017, 64) has devised a typology of the martyrs' response to the pain inflicted by torture: the first of these is insensitivity to pain. Pain does not exist for them because they simply do not feel it. The second response involves a divine presence; martyrs are often accompanied by divine beings that help them endure pain. The third and final response, which I shall examine in detail, is the development of a mind/body dualism. The contrast between body and soul enables hagiographic texts to represent torture as something earthly, finite and momentary, as opposed to the eternal and immutable glory that Christians will attain. Examples abound, but one of the most paradigmatic cases is another of Eulalia's utterances (*Pe.* 3, 91/95) at the moment of her execution: "Go ahead, executioner, set fire to me, burn / break my limbs made of mud. / A fragile thing is easy to break, / But pain will not affect my inner soul". In the 5th century, Gallonius' reply to the proconsul (*Pass. Gal.* 46 [247]) is equally unequivocal: "You have power over my skin, but none over my soul". In the mid-5th century, the narrator of the *Passio* of Cecilia (*Pass. Caec.* [95]) again asserts something similar: "For, indeed, although they [*sc.* the martyrs] suffer momentary pain, they attain eternal glory".

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The construction of the body as a finite entity also reaffirms it as a place of salvation: "In the early Christian and medieval periods". Macmillan (2017, 103) asserts, "pain was revalidated and socialized through its necessity in the scheme of salvation". Furthermore, it seems that martyrs attained eternal glory through the degradation of their broken bodies: "and therefore I shall accept all the punishments you inflict on me, so that I may attain eternal good from them" (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [122, 5/7]). As Hollywood (1995, 13) stated: "The wounded body is capable of signalling God's presence because it marks human immanence, limitation and hence createdness".

Along these same lines, many interpretations, such as Cobb's (2017, 153), have posited that the expectation of eternal glory after death overlaid an experiential reality in which pain, violence and death formed part of the daily rhythm of these communities. While accurate, I believe that these representations held a deeper meaning for the Christian communities of the time. According to Konstan (2010), on a much more profound level these codes corresponded to a conceptualisation of the individual self as indestructible, in contrast to the corruptible body (Konstan 2010, 298):

> Of course, one could be persuaded to change one's beliefs, but the means of doing so were not through the body, but by way of the mind. The virtue of the [...] saints was that they maintained their convictions under pressure, but that they did not betray them in word or deed, in the behaviors that were demanded of them. The division between body and soul was a means of protecting the self.

In this code, bodies can be manipulated and broken, but ideas and profound convictions cannot. Shirin's skin is constructed as fragile and corruptible, but her soul and her glory will be eternal and unchanging. In fact, everything seems to point to the destruction of her skin as the very means by which Shirin will attain her eternal glory.

4.4.1. Malleable bodies: gendered and ascetic dimensions

Extending this notion, representations of the skin as fragile have repercussions on other levels as well. As we have seen, the body in late antiquity could be conceived of as porous and therefore prone to infection by malignant external agents. Some gender-specific codes have been developed as regards the porosity or non-porosity of bodies (Moss 2010, 513-514). This spectrum was also hierarchical, with the male body ranking higher in the spectrum than the female body. Masculinity was located on the positive extreme of the spectrum, being associated with the characteristics of firmness and integrity, whereas feminine characteristics of the body occupied the other end of the spectrum: the negative, the fragile, the soft and the malleable —see Mattioli (1983) for a gender-based analysis of this aspect—.

Greek philosophy tended to polarise aspects such as left and right or hot and cold, and this polarisation was also extended to bodies and their positive or negative attributions (Lloyd 1964, 104). A soft, permeable and fragile body was associated in medical codes with femininity (Moss 2010, 513):

> Women are colder: they are moist, squishy, and porous. The interchangeability of feminine and weak is demonstrated in Hippocratic theories of gestation. A hot, dry womb will produce both male infants and strong infants. A cold, wet womb will produce females and weak children.

Isidore (*De ecclesiasticis officiis* 2, 11)[22] also includes firmness and integrity among the characteristics of a good orator and rejects weakness and aspects more associated with femininity as

[22] Cited in Coon (2008, 433).

male characteristics (Coon 2008, 433-434). In fact, our text admires Shirin's integrity as a martyr for not having succumbed to the weakness of her sex and age (*Pass. Sir.* 1 [113, 14/19]):

> However, we shall not relate a man's deeds of arms, or the exploits of one of those who have ascended by divine commandment, but the successes of the female nature [γυναικείας φύσεως κατορθώματα] and the exploits of a young woman educated in heathen impiety [Ἑλλενική δυσσεβείᾳ][23], in no way inferior to the combats of the former. For neither has the weakness of her nature [ἀσθένεια φύσεως] harmed her, nor has her youth dispersed her thoughts or aroused them in vain.

From this reference, we can deduce that the author of the text views her physical and ideological integrity as being praiseworthy, establishing a very interesting notion in which the physical plane of the skin — represented in its incorruptibility after torture and death — is associated with the ideological plane of the integrity of Shirin's spirit. Unlike Golinduch's skin, Shirin's is impermeable and does not emanate power, but it does serve as a site for the expression of the martyr's steadiness, convictions, and specific cultural codifications.

At another passage, Shirin is thrown into a cave for three days and three nights, but emerges intact and surrounded by pleasant scents and light; her recurring encounters with the devil (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [116]; 16 [124, 1/4]; 25 [129]) test her mettle and faith. She even threatens to "[make] the mark of the cross" on the forehead of the Zoroastrian priest to drive out the demon within him (*Pass. Sir.* 23 [128, 5/7])[24]; the text itself goes to great lengths to show "in what darkness and in what manner she was imprisoned [*sc.* Shirin], captured and how she approached the light of truth on her own and escaped the wiles of the devil" (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [114, 9/13]). These references endow the story with specific ideals related to asceticism.

Caves or enclosed natural features are common locations in ascetic texts (Benz 1954) Caves and, in general, any harmful or dangerous place, served as a demonstration of the saints' spiritual integrity (Molina Gómez 2006, esp. 862 n. 1). These functioned above all as a prelude to light and safety, which by extension was associated with the Christian faith. Moreover, Shirin's efforts to maintain her stiff resolve are perfectly in line with ascetic ideals (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [114, 21/25]):

> She left a group of important women and also retired from the company of well-groomed young men [πλουτοκομῶντας], but cherished the company of those who, though poor in life [πρὸς τὰς εὐτελεῖς μὲν τῷ βιῷ], were careful in their manners, and endeavoured to make them her kith and kin.

Sexual abstinence, of course, is another key element in the martyr's moral severity (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [115, 2/3]):

> She [*sc.* Shirin] made no effort to give herself to a man nor did she worry about earthly cares [ταῖς βιωτικαῖς […] μερίμναις], to the point of avoiding people's gaze and hiding the beauty of her body, devoting herself to fasting and other ordeals, and sometimes throwing dust in her eyes.

[23] The term Ἑλλενικός is used throughout the text to refer to non-Christian communities.

[24] On the mark of the Christian cross as an apotropaic sign, see Garipzanov (2018, esp. 36-37; 99-108); for the physical mark of the cross on the skin, especially Dölger (1929); see Ferguson (2009, esp. 218-219) and Pignot (2019) for the sign of the cross on the forehead as an indication of ritual integration into the Christian community.

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The incessant conflict with demons[25], the metaphorical meaning of the caves — and the symbolic association between their darkness and the dangers of Zoroastrianism — and her passage towards the light through conversion, the healing of her illnesses caused by not revealing her Christian faith and her disinterest in earthly aspects all point to an ascetic ideal. Shirin's skin thus emerges as limited because it serves the narrator to convey specific ascetic ideals and motivations to the community to which this testimony was addressed. In other words, Shirin's malleable — although later uncorrupted — body becomes the site of identity expression for these communities, who use her unharmed skin to construct specific patterns of behaviour, mostly related to asceticism and moral steadiness, in relation to other communities.

It is important to stress that this way of representing the skin is particular to this text, and is not the only one. As we have seen, Golinduch's body is constructed in an almost diametrically opposed manner to Shirin's, but it essentially serves the same purpose of identity cohesion. What I would like to highlight here is how Shirin's skin has been represented in a specific way to the audience. She constructs her own skin as malleable and fragile, but essential to attain eternal glory. In contrast, the text conveys a message of physical and moral integrity and firmness, anchored in ascetic ideals and motivations that underpin the conception of the body as something that must be overcome.

5. Conclusions

Evidently, public statements about the skin in Christian hagiographies were diverse in nature. Shirin's, Elias', Golinduch's, Macrina's and Eulalia's bodies are all different, and as such, different communicative codes are ascribed to them and developed through them. Two aspects are relevant here, the first of which refers to the communicative quality of these bodies. The use of the speech codes theory has demonstrated that literary representations of these bodies were transformed into communicative codes. Martyrs' skin created public discourses that were important for the community that wrote them, narrated them and used them as a site for religious articulation.

The second aspect is the intersectional nature of these codes. The literary construction of Shirin's skin in particular is an amalgam of encodings of numerous cultural discourses, such as asceticism, demonology and gender constructions. Shirin contradicts the cultural codification of the female body as unstable, moist, permeable and fragile, while her skin, in contrast, appears completely unscathed. However, to assume that the author of the text attributed masculine qualities to the martyr by presenting her body as rigid and unyielding would be to go too far and would surely miss the point of the analysis[26]. Nevertheless, it would not be wrong to conclude that ascetic ideals favoured a very specific codification of Shirin's skin and body, and that these

[25] On demonology and monasticism, especially considering testimonies that are not usually included in analyses of these aspects, see Brakke (2001). In general, see Goehring (1999; 2012) and, on a material perspective, Wiśniewski (2015).

[26] This tendency of thinking about women martyrs' bodies as often masculine has led to what Salés (2020) has recently named the "Compulsory Masculinisation Thesis". In many analyses, female martyrs have sometimes been considered to present masculine characteristics instead of their femininity. In turn, Salés interestingly argues that this characterization is rooted in deeper contemporary codifications and that these women subverted gender categorisations by specific ways of acting and queering their gender, but not ascribing masculine characteristics to their femininity.

in turn motivated a public discourse that not only focused on her physical appearance, but also encompassed numerous planes and patterns of behaviour in the Christian communities of northern Mesopotamia at the close of the Sassanid Empire.

In discussing these aspects, my intention has been to elucidate one of the many identity strategies that Christian hagiographers employed, especially in particular contexts, to define a religious identity and how one particular aspect can intersect with other dimensions. Through this study, I hope to pave the way for new approaches to understanding the skin in hagiographic testimonies, studying the relationship between the bodies of the martyrs and those of the audience, understanding how the boundary between individual and group is fragmented or reinforced in specific situations and revealing that ultimately, writing about the skin is writing about ourselves, about what separates us or brings us closer, about the fragile and the whole.

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