

In and Beyond the Female Body. Between Reproductive Control and Renunciation in Byzantium

by Larisa Ficulle Santini and Anna Maria Taragna

17 June 2026

6pm

Ágnes-Heller-Haus

1st floor, SR 2



This joint lecture investigates the Byzantine female body as a contested space, shaped by tensions between reproduction, social control, and spirituality. It does so through two distinct yet interconnected papers. The first (Larisa Ficulle Santini) examines the underexplored field of fertility control; the second (Anna Maria Taragna) considers how ascetic practices propose more radical forms of disengagement from the body.

Fertility control practices – contraception and abortion – were known and used in the Eastern Roman Empire, as attested by a wide range of sources spanning diverse genres and chronologies. This paper offers an introduction to the topic, focusing in particular on a central research question: who possessed this knowledge, and how was it transmitted? While some sources – gynecological treatises – reflect male physicians' technical engagement with the regulation of reproduction, others, legal and liturgical texts, point to women's participation in fertility control.

The second part turns to the Lives of cross-dressed female saints, examining a paradoxical model of holiness in which the female body is not simply disciplined, but symbolically suppressed and transformed. Through the practice of cross-dressing (metaschematismós), women abandon their visible femininity in order to enter male monastic environments and attain ascetic authority. Yet this erasure is only temporary: the female body re-emerges at crucial narrative moments, particularly in scenes of recognition (anagnorismós), where the exposure of the naked body reveals both biological sex and spiritual achievement. Femininity reappears not only in moments of bodily disclosure, but also through other female figures – accusers, patrons, and recipients of miracles – whose presence reintroduces it in displaced, excessive, or socially marked forms. So, sanctity is constructed through a complex interplay of suppression and re-emergence, in which the female body is both denied and made visible.

Moving beyond the female body as a merely constrained or regulated entity, the joint lecture offers two complementary perspectives on the ways in which the female body could be defined, controlled, transformed, and, at times, transcended in Byzantium.

Zoom Link

