

## Introduction

Maximos the Confessor (580–662) was a monk of the Roman Empire who lived through some of its most cataclysmic and defining decades.<sup>1</sup> He was born fifteen years after Justinian's rule (527–565), during which imperial borders were unsustainably expanded at an incalculable demographic and fiscal cost that rapidly jeopardized the state's viability. The monastic intellectual witnessed, often first-hand, the political, military, and religious conflicts that repeatedly destabilized the Empire, such as the enormously destructive Roman-Sasanian War (602–626), the Arab conquests that followed a few years later, and several Christological controversies. Against this backdrop, even the general outline of Maximos' early life has become speculative. There are three hypotheses about his provenance – Constantinople, Palestine, Alexandria – none without problems.<sup>2</sup> Wherever Maximos hailed from, he received an outstanding education in scriptural and Patristic exegesis and in late Platonic philosophy, which by this time was an eclectic undertaking encompassing not only the Platonic-Aristotelian corpus (then considered one philosophical system) but also certain reanimated features of Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, and other classical schools. These intellectual currents are all apparent in Maximos' oeuvre, which almost entirely consists of his ad hoc responses to petitions by acquaintances to offer his commentary on disputed texts and traditions. The shape of the Confessor's corpus is hardly surprising, as he was well connected across the Mediterranean world, especially throughout the monastic and aristocratic networks of Roman-occupied Africa from Alexandria to Carthage, and was, therefore, often called upon as a religious authority to weigh in on heady subjects. Maximos' prominence translated to a perilous conspicuousness when renewed Christological disputes became lethally political in the later decades of his life. Maximos' unflinching opposition to the court's official position, known as Monothelitism, eventually resulted in the mutilation of his right hand and tongue, the instruments through which he had theologically defied the Constantinopolitan seat of power.<sup>3</sup> Thus punished, but not martyred, the adamantine monk earned the honorific "the Confessor" and was exiled alongside his lifelong ascetic partner, Anastasios, to a military prison near the Black Sea in today's Georgia. He died there soon after from the torturous ordeal he endured in his crepuscular years.

Based on bibliographic entries (ca. 3,000), the Maximian corpus is currently the most studied premodern Greek Christian body of texts outside the New Testament.

<sup>1</sup> A few orienting studies: Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*; Booth, *Crisis of Empire*; Kaldellis, *New Roman Empire*, 320–404.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see Salés, "The Other Life of Maximos the Confessor," 407–439. For a critique of Salés, see Ohme, *Kirche in der Krise*, 637–638.

<sup>3</sup> The belief that Christ has one divine will, rather than a human will and a divine will.

His corpus is not particularly large: Two average volumes of Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* contain nearly all his works, most of which have more recently received critical editions. Nearly all of these texts are outwardly epistolary, in the sense that they are letters in response to earlier communications, but their "inner genre," so to speak, differs considerably and includes the questions-and-answers (*erotapokriseis*) genre, common among monastics seeking wisdom from an elder through a back-and-forth series of questions and answers, the chapters (*kephalaia*) genre, a form popularized by Evagrius of Pontos to ease monastic memorization of pithy aphorisms, the scriptural and Patristic exegetical genre, and so on. These distinctions are in some sense artificial, as several of Maximos' works include features of multiple genres. For example, the *Difficulties* (aka *Ambigua*) is a very long (ca. 80,000 words) exegetical epistle seemingly in the form of an *erotapokriseis* that also relies heavily on late Platonic and Patristic commentary conventions. Thus, Maximos' work is highly varied in subjects and approaches.

Maximos was one of the last major late ancient Christian theologians and bridged the way to the early medieval Roman era. The monastic author attempted to distill some six centuries of Greek Christian thought into a system given coherence by his own idiosyncratic genius. This system is rigorous and highly technical, with the result that it often presents to first-time readers (and seasoned alike!) as a steeply sloped ascent to elusive terraces of sublime fruits that, even when found, require protracted harvesting and intellectual mastication before their nourishment becomes digestible. Nonetheless, most who have undertaken this venture affirm the worthwhileness of the trek, even if getting routinely lost or chipping a tooth on a proverbial small, hard seed appears to be an occupational hazard of the venture. It bears pondering, then, what about Maximos' thought has seemed perennially appealing to modern and postmodern scholars.

The monastic intellectual's prominence may be partly attributed to the resonance his preoccupations have found with modern audiences, including profound reflections on psychology, ethics, cosmology, spirituality, and sexual difference. Conversely, Maximos' thought is enthralling for its aspiration to an organic and intricately interwoven coherence of diverse subjects that discourages the examination of any particular one in isolation, much as the heart's function cannot be understood without also that of the brain, lungs, arteries, and veins.<sup>4</sup> So, while the central topic of this Element is the monastic author's view of sexual difference, it is inadvisable to treat this content without also engaging with his protology, eschatology, cosmology, anthropology, and Christology, to

<sup>4</sup> Maximos Constas has made a different point to a similar effect. See *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers* vol. 1, xxiv.

name the most salient. This much is clear in the most important text in this study, *Difficulty* 41, which lays out a fivefold division of the universe, ranging from uncreated and created at the most general level down to male and female at the most specific. Accordingly, a critical reexamination of Maximos' thought on sexual difference might carry implications beyond human corporeality alone, tracing its ripple effects across the cosmic structure that circumscribes it.

Specifically, this study is concerned with Maximos' effort to postulate an eschatological human universality that converges around an ostensibly unsexed "human" (ἄνθρωπος). In other words, in the life hereafter, sexual difference will vanish, though Maximos never spelled out the specifics of what that entailed, even if he does drop a few hints. According to Maximos, the eschatological human transcends the difference and division into "male" (ἄρρεν/ἄρσεν) and "female" (θῆλυ) to fulfill God's plan for humanity in uniting all creation with the divine through deification. Maximos is squarely situated here within an imposing trajectory of early Christian exegetes who variously wrestled with the Genesis creation story (Gen 1–3) and with the Pauline corpus, in particular with Paul's affirmation that in Christ there is "neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28), on one hand, and with his famed Adam–Christ typology (Rom 5:12–21), on the other. Moreover, these exegetical undertakings had to be articulated from within the defining parameters of the Greek medical sciences and metaphysics of difference.

In addition to these cultural currents, Maximos distinctively expounded his understanding of sexual difference<sup>5</sup> through his teaching of the *logoi* of creation. The *logoi* refer to the divine ideas or designs that define the universe's diverse and individuated ontological architecture. Maximos offers one of his clearest expositions of this teaching at *Difficulty* 7.16: "Containing the preexisting *logoi* of beings before all ages, by His good will He established the visible and invisible creation out of non-being based on them, *creating* and continuing to create *with reason and wisdom all things* (Wis 9:1–2) at their necessary moment, universals as well as particulars."<sup>6</sup> As Maximos indicates, the *logoi*

<sup>5</sup> Sexual difference as a concept from feminist and gender studies has a long and complex tradition that is often traced to late second-wave French and Belgian feminists, especially Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig. I do not intend to use the term with the full theoretical apparatus that originates with theorists like Irigaray and later challenged by early third-wave/queer theorists, such as Judith Butler. Rather, I primarily use sexual difference as a relatively loose category for two main reasons. First, much of this Element is itself the debate about what something such as "sexual difference" even is, and therefore its meaning needs to be allowed a certain conceptual freedom that is then attended to through a nuanced study that discourages a readymade and simple definition from the outset, a definition that would likely be unintelligible without proper contextualization. The second reason is that "sexual difference" has now become the most commonly used term to debate the subject in Maximian studies, in part, I think, because it also approximates the Greek terminology that Maximos uses in *Difficulty* 41 better than alternatives.

<sup>6</sup> *Diff* 7.16. I capitalize references to the divine to avoid ambiguity in the subject antecedent.

designate both universal categories, such as existence or beauty, and specific individuals, such as Maximos and Anastasios. Given this understanding of the *logoi*, it is noteworthy that the Confessor asserts in *Difficulty* 41 that sexual differentiation into male and female contravenes God's intention, having no basis in the *logos*, and will therefore be eliminated. Simply put, sexual difference is unnatural and ephemeral.

This bold affirmation has generated a lively scholarly conversation over the past eight decades that has yielded substantively different, and sometimes diametrically opposed, interpretations. Presently I offer an overview and assessment of these interpretative traditions, but for now, I would like to register my primary reservation about the lion's share of them. Despite their ample merits, these studies evince little appreciable familiarity with scholarship on the body and sexual difference during late antiquity. Accordingly, the historiographical, if not theological, persuasiveness of their findings is at least partly compromised. The unexamined assumption that ever-so-slightly curtails my otherwise effusive appreciation of this excellent scholarship is that one can draw lines of unbroken conceptual continuity, that is, that one can assume a certain unshakeable referential stability, between late antiquity and the present regarding key terms of the debate, such as "male" and "female." I am skeptical about the self-evidence of this assumption. While there is some disagreement about models of sexual difference in antiquity and late antiquity (see section one), Roman Christians espoused fundamentally different tenets about the status of the body and the grounds of sexual difference than any modern or postmodern model. If so, Maximos' reflections on sexual difference require a systematic, contextualizing revision and reinterpretation.

Concretely, I argue that Maximos tacitly envisioned the eradication of sexual difference as female sublimation into the male, resulting in a sexually homogenized eschatology predicated on male singularity. Maximos deserves a modest concession in this regard, though: Unlike some of his predecessors, who were unapologetic and sometimes vitriolically misogynistic about this outcome, Maximos attempted to articulate human unity beyond female *and* male – he simply did not succeed in that undertaking. This failure is largely attributable to the inescapable epistemological constraints of his geochronological context, which was defined by scriptural specificity and Patristic precedent, as well as by Greek intellectual legacies. For example, Aristotle's works on sexual difference and embryology remained the standard in the seventh century, and despite discrete innovations or partial contestations by others, premodern Greek medicine perdured as an inhospitable environment to non-male bodies and was especially injurious and nasty to women. Maximos thus inherited intricate legacies of both traditions that he idiosyncratically transformed while remaining shackled by

some of their operative androcentric and correlatedly misogynistic assumptions. The upshot is that the monastic author's bold and otherwise compelling vision of human unity with God never fully eschewed the trappings of sexist discourse, thereby jeopardizing the thoroughgoing coherence of his theological project, even if judged by its own logical grammar. Next, I sketch a cartography of the scholarly landscape on sexual difference in Maximian studies to situate my argument in relation to the conversations that have preceded it.

To my knowledge, Hans Urs von Balthasar was the first modern scholar to engage sexual difference in Maximos' corpus. While discussing *Difficulty* 41, von Balthasar argues for a synthesis of the two sexes that results in a transformation "of the mortal condition" (*des sterblichen Zustands*) into what he dubs a "higher third [condition] (*höherem Dritten*)"<sup>7</sup> that, to retain the divine image, extends Paul's Gal 3:28 to "all sexual difference (*alle geschlechtliche Differenz*)" and, therefore, this difference "must be denied – primarily in a personal, but consequently also in a corporeal sphere (*leiblichen Sphäre*)."<sup>8</sup> Von Balthasar takes Maximos' claims about a sexless eschaton seriously by proposing a synthesis that attempts to negate sexual difference. Still, we must wonder whether this synthesis avoids the trappings of Roman masculinity discourse (see below).

By contrast, Juan-Miguel Garrigues maintained that the conception

of birth as a manifestation of a fallen mode of being . . . of human nature (*du mode d'être . . . déchu de la nature humaine*) is without a doubt derivative from the theory of Gregory of Nyssa, according to which sexuality is a consequence of sin. Also, in reverse from Origenism, it is not the natural distinction of the sexes (*la distinction naturelle des sexes*) that, for Maximos, is posterior to the fall, but the *mode* of their division.<sup>9</sup>

Garrigues highlights Maximos' debt to Gregory and Origen in regarding sexual opposition as a postlapsarian event, but inexplicably also refers to a "natural distinction of the sexes" before the fall, a belief that, as we will see, Maximos never espoused. On Garrigues' reading, the fall only affects human relations, so that Christ's salvific effect on humanity is not directed at the "natural difference of the sexes" but at "the passionate mode of their relationships (*le mode passionnel de leurs rapports*)."<sup>10</sup> Because Garrigues assumes two prelapsarian "natural sexes," he surmises that Maximos never envisioned the eradication of male and female as such, only of their postlapsarian antagonism.

Following Garrigues, Doru Costache advanced the related notion that "living above gender was for him [Maximos] not a spiritual victory over the gendered

<sup>7</sup> Von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 203.      <sup>8</sup> Von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 202.

<sup>9</sup> Garrigues, *Maxime le Confesseur*, 108, emphasis of the original.

<sup>10</sup> Garrigues, *Maxime le Confesseur*, 178.

humankind, but instead represented the virtuous reorientation of the human energies toward dispassionate relationships.”<sup>11</sup> Costache thus tries to resolve sexual difference on the relational, not the corporeal, plane. Similarly, Paul Blowers has taken exception to von Balthasar’s notion of a sexual synthesis, underscoring that “it is not clear why the difference between male and female must absolutely evaporate in the age to come. Human ‘mediation’ looks toward a final dissolution, not of sexes as such, but of the alienation between sexes.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Blowers reaffirms Costache’s point that the fundamental change inaugurated by Christ between the sexes is a virtuous reorientation of their relationships, not an “evaporation” of their sexual distinctions. Kostake Milkov similarly concludes: “The journey towards the uniting of all creation, as Maximus sees it, happens through the overcoming of the divisions, but not through the abolishing of the distinctions.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, Yekaterina Khitruk has pithily expressed the central claim of this interpretative tradition:

Just as in overcoming the first division into created and uncreated beings (тварное и нетварное бытие) God does not cease to be God nor the human, human, so also in overcoming the last division (into the male and female sex), the human does not cease to possess the characteristics (признаками) of the one or the other sex (того или другого пола).<sup>14</sup>

In a word, these scholars collectively assume that Maximos presupposes sexually dimorphic bodies that endure eschatologically, while their adversity does not.

This interpretative tradition is not without hermeneutical infelicities, however. For example, in addition to the anachronistic assumption of a specific type of sexual dimorphism (see Section 1), this interpretation chimerically produces a position that Maximos nowhere articulates. That is, the Confessor never wrote about the postlapsarian brokenness of male–female relationships as such, perhaps in part because in his protology there never existed prelapsarian sexually differentiated bodies whose ideal relationships were shattered by the ancestral transgression to begin with. The closest approximations to this subject are his vaguest advice to neophyte monks to avoid spending too much time with women,<sup>15</sup> his mediation in the early 640s between the implacable Coptic nuns of the monastery of Sakerdos and the Alexandrian governor George,<sup>16</sup> and his affirmation that using women for sexual pleasure rather than for reproduction is abusive.<sup>17</sup> But these passages hardly constitute more than offhand remarks addressed, in all cases, to monastic recipients and cannot be aggregated to

<sup>11</sup> Costache, “Living above Gender,” 263. <sup>12</sup> Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor*, 221.

<sup>13</sup> Milkov, “Maximus,” 436. <sup>14</sup> Khitruk, “Концептуализация отношения пола,” 50.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., *ChL* 3.20. <sup>16</sup> See *Ep* 11, 18; PG 91.453A–457D; 584D–589B. <sup>17</sup> E.g., *ChL* 2.17.

establish a major theme in the Confessor's thought, nor do any of them appear in the context of eschatological speculation. Further, and tellingly overlooked in this interpretative current, is the fact that Maximos himself did not hesitate to invoke pseudo-Pauline literature (e.g., 1 Tim 2:12–14) in an effort to silence women who theologically disagreed with him, such as the *patrikia* Martina, widow of the emperor Herakleios and de facto Roman head of state for most of 641.<sup>18</sup> Simply put, there is little evidence that Maximos envisioned an eschatologically irenic outcome to male–female agonistics when writing about eradicating sexual difference.

Indeed, some scholars have already questioned interpretations that mollify Maximos' assertions about the eschatological eradication of sexual difference. For example, Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska was the first to contend that “I cannot agree with the suggestion that . . . only the division will be dismissed but there will still be some kind of a distinction between man and woman. The entire *Difficulty* 41 should have been aborted in order to make this theory convincing.”<sup>19</sup> More recently, David Bradshaw has also registered his skepticism: “I cannot agree with some recent exegetes who think . . . that for Maximus, our physical sexual differentiation will remain in the eschaton.”<sup>20</sup> Two other scholars have reached similar conclusions. Sotiris Mitralaxis maintains, after a disciplined close reading of *Difficulty* 41, that “sexual difference *itself* (and not only sexual division or reproduction) will not endure the *eschata*.”<sup>21</sup> Eren Brown Dewhurst concurs with this assessment, adding: “In saying that the property of male and female is in no way linked to the original *logos* of human nature, Maximus claims that male and female characteristics were never intended to be a part of human nature.”<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, he continues: “Since sexual difference is absent from human *logos* and will be completely removed, both in difference and division, we can see it better typifying an instance of a change introduced into *tropos* that is anticipated to be removed from humanity eschatologically.”<sup>23</sup>

In the previous passage, Dewhurst is invoking a famed distinction in Maximos' thought between *logos* and *tropos* that we must board before going further.<sup>24</sup> The *logos*, as noted before, corresponds to the divine conception of an

<sup>18</sup> *Ep* 12, PG 91:461C–464A. See Salés, “Maximos' Correspondence” (forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> Kochańczyk-Bonińska, “Maximos' Concept of the Sexes,” 237; similarly see Bradshaw, “Sexual Difference,” 27.

<sup>20</sup> Bradshaw, “Sexual Difference,” 27.

<sup>21</sup> Mitralaxis, “Attempt at Clarifying,” 199 (emphasis the author's).

<sup>22</sup> Dewhurst, “Absence of Sexual Difference,” 206; see also 220–221.

<sup>23</sup> Dewhurst, “Absence of Sexual Difference,” 212.

<sup>24</sup> On the *logos-tropos* distinction, see Larchet, “La conception maximienne,” 276–284 and *La divinisation*, 62–80, 141–151, and 617–624; Mira, “El doblete ΛΟΓΟΣ- ΤΡΟΠΙΟΣ,” 685–696; Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 442–444; Mitralaxis, “Maximos' 'Logical' Ontology,” 65–82; Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 64–81.