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ASTERIA AND EPITOGIA: APOCALYPSES, LAIC
VENERATION, AND THE FORMATION OF
MARIOLOGY IN CONSTANTINOPLE

STEPHEN WHITAKER

There is extant a significant amount of literature regarding the early Christian veneration of Mary. It is clear that syncretism and confluence stemming from pagan influences has affected the development of Christian understanding of the mother of Christ, yet the degree to which this happened is an issue incidental to which are many theological and historiographical implications. The broader question I would like to explore in this paper is that of the evolution of Mariology and Mariolatry in early Christian Constantinople, or, more specifically, how the pagan roots of the city were manifested in that evolution. This is a very broad issue, admittedly beyond the scope of this short paper, and for that reason I would like to specifically treat the role of the particularly evocative images of the astral motif and robes of glory; images which were well nourished by those pagan roots. My argument is that these images played a significant role in shaping the theological development of Constantinople and of Eastern Christianity during the formative first centuries, and did so not just by mandate from the top down, but through a kind of laic viral marketing that shaped ecclesiastical and imperial policy by way of the cultural identity of the citizens of Constantinople.

The Astral Motif and the the Queen of Heaven

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she, being with child, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. . . . And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.¹

This passage in *Revelation* 12 describing the Virgin clothed in celestial bodies and glory is one of only a few direct attributive references to the mother

1. Rev 12: 1–5.

of Jesus in the New Testament. The image portrayed in this passage remained an important archetype for representations of Mary in art and literature for centuries to come. The astral motif became prominent in the architecture of the churches of the sixth century, and the “dome of heaven” became an important structural symbol of the church as microcosm.² The dome took on the function of the sky, the mysterious veil that separates our mortal cosmos from the everlasting realm of deity beyond, held up by the four arches of the dome representing the four corners of the earth. This theme was popularized in the aesthetics of Pseudo-Dionysius, whose philosophy of emanation bore particular hellenistic semblance.³ These themes were not, however without precedent in the greater Near Eastern and Hellenistic context. The sky as a glittering robe was a common depiction in describing the gods, and more frequently, the goddesses. In Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, Isis is described as wearing a black robe adorned with a full moon surrounded by stars.⁴ Isis and the Virgin shared in addition to this astral motif the characteristics of motherhood, supremacy, and resurrection, all of which bore symbolic affiliation to the expanse of the sky. The celestial robe designated the extent of the dominion of the wearer, and would elicit the title “Queen of Heaven,” which was applied to, among others, Caelestis, who was also syncretized with other lunar deities such as Selene and Artemis. These all were connected with the lunar cycle, the menstrual properties of that cycle, and motherhood. The description in Revelation 12 of the woman “clothed with the sun” evoked further correlation with Helios and the properties associated with his celestial authority. In the fifth century Macrobius equated all the gods with the sun and designated the sun as the symbol of superlative reason.⁵ The association of Mary with light is one that became central to her Byzantine persona as a torch-bearer.⁶

The Mother of Us All and The Mother of Harlots: Who was Cut from Which Cloth?

In addition to the astral motifs present in *Revelation*, another significant

2. The earliest extant literary reference to the architectural motif appears in a Syriac hymn on the church of Haghia Sophia in Edessa. This hymn, though written in Syriac, was seen as indicative of popular Greek ideas that would become a staple of Byzantine symbolic architecture, and utilized prominently in both the church of Aghia Irene and what became the epitome of Byzantine architecture: the Church of Haghia Sophia in Constantinople. *Edessa Hymn*, in Kathleen E. McVey, “The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol,” in *Art, Archaeology, and Architecture of early Christianity* (ed. Paul Corby Finney; vol. 18 of *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, David M. Scholer, and Paul Corby Finney. New York and London: Garland, 1993).

3. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *The History of Aesthetics*, (trans J. Harrell, C. Barrett and D. Petsch; New York: Continuum, 2005), 31 For a broader (but much older) treatment of the astral motif of the dome and its place in a hellenistic and near eastern context, see Karl Lehman, “Dome of Heaven,” *Art Bulletin* 27:1 (March 1945) 1–27.

4. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11.3–4 (Hanson, LCL).

5. Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.17.3.

6. See note 22.

image is that of the “Mother of Harlots” portrayed in chapter 17. This delineation of the antithesis of the virtue and modesty attributed to Mary presents a paradox in Mariological depictions, as it demonizes many of the very images later used as part of the liturgical repertoire of Mariological veneration:

And I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written, “Mystery, Bablyon the Great, the Mother of Harlots, and Abominations of the Earth.”⁷

A historical-critical reading of *Revelation* often renders the work as an attempt by John to proscribe to a certain extent assimilation into the Roman Imperial Culture generally and idolatry more specifically, which informs our reading of Revelation 17. Along the vein of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible whose writings were characterized by strict denunciation of polytheism and idolatry, John’s writings seem to be a literary tribute infused with a similar social commentary. Biblical references to Babylon have supplied interpretations of this passage as a reference to the city of Rome itself. Also, the “mother of harlots” can be seen as a play on words and a reference to Cybele, the “great mother.” This evokes language used by the prophet Jeremiah to castigate veneration of the “Queen of Heaven,” a title used to describe an idolatrous goddess, probably Asherah.⁸ In using such language the Revelator seems to be commenting on the homogeneity of the condition of the two epochs. The woman sitting on the beast could also be compared to Artemis, who was depicted as “queen of the wild beasts”⁹ or Cybele, who was often depicted in the company of lions.¹⁰

However, the image of purple and scarlet cloth in which the “Mother of Harlots” is adorned took on a degree of polyvalence among early Christians. The second century apocryphal account of the early life of Mary known as the *Protoevangelium* (or *Proto-gospel*) of James had been growing in popularity, and its themes became well known. Among these themes was that of the Virgin spinning purple and scarlet cloth for the veil of the temple. The *Protoevangelium* described the generation and early life of Mary, who herself was conceived under miraculous circumstances and born to the aging Anna and Joachim, who in gratitude for the birth of their daughter promised to consecrate the girl to the Lord by sending her to the temple, where she would

7. *Revelation*. 17:3–5.

8. Jeremiah 7:18, 44:17. The particularly disparaging reference to veneration of the “Queen of Heaven” in Jeremiah 7:18 is particularly representative of the portrayal of the goddess: “The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto other gods, that they may provoke me to anger.”

9. *Iliad*, 21.470.

10. Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1993), 105.

remain until she reached the age of twelve. Upon Mary's attainment of twelve years the priests, fearing defilement of the temple, had her leave and assigned the significantly older Joseph to watch over her. Later, the priests decided to select from among the virgins seamstresses to spin cloth for the veil of the temple. Mary was given the honor of spinning purple and scarlet. It was while she was spinning that she received the angelic annunciation of her prominence among women and her role as the vessel that would bring forth the child Jesus.¹¹

The image of the virgin weaving as a symbol of modesty and wisdom was something that had long been associated with the veneration of Athena.¹² This is one of multiple manifestations of pagan influence present in the delineation. Stephen Benko, whose research on Early Christianity often returns to these themes, also points to the impossibility of Mary's access to the "third step of the altar" and the Holy of Holies as related in the *Protoevangelium's* account as an indication of greater pagan influences than Palestinian, as Palestinian Jews would have been much less likely to ignore the significance of priestly functions in the context described in the *Protoevangelium*.¹³

These paradoxes would have been less significant to a newly converted body politic with a national tradition steeped in the very images that are the apparent subject of John's social and political censure. The popular spread of the concepts conveyed in the *Protoevangelium of James* preceded any kind of ecclesiastical mandates of many of these abstractions. "What is most interesting," Vasiliki Lamberis points out, "is that very few Patristic authors allowed the apocryphal tales to influence their doctrinal writing until late in the fourth century. Marian piety, however, was spreading in spite of the Church during this period."¹⁴ Veneration of Mary was evolving throughout the empire, and usually to a greater degree by women. This trend was not always looked on favorably by the church hierarchy. For example Epiphanius, the fourth-century bishop of Salamis, was occupied with this phenomenon as he felt there was a great imbalance in the degrees of reverence to Mary. Though he held her immaculate conception and referred to her as Theotokos, he feared that "the worst sort of harm" was excessive glorification. He is particularly stern in his evaluation of the Collyridians, a group of Thracian women in Arabia who venerated Mary with offerings. Seizing the opportunity to elucidate what he viewed as the corrupt nature of women in an almost hesiodic trope, he asks:

11. *Proto-Gospel of James*. 12.

12. Ioanna Papadopoulou-Belmehdi, "Greek Weaving or the Feminine in Antithesis," *Diogenes* no. 167, vol. 42/3 (Fall 1994), 39–56 n.b. 41 In fact, just as Mary is contrasted against the literary foil of the "Mother of Harlots," Athena in the act of weaving can be said to be a foil against Aphrodite, who is in fact incapable of successfully spinning though she tries. Catherine Caren Gines, "Preceding Allegory: Byzantine Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning" (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1998), 16–17.

13. Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 200.

14. Vasiliki Lamberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 146.

And who but women are the teachers of this? Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited . . . here the devil has seen fit to disgorge ridiculous teachings from the mouths of women. For certain women decorate a barbers chair or a square seat, spread a cloth on it, set out bread and offer it in Mary's name a certain day of the year, and all partake of the bread; I discussed parts of this right in my letter to Arabia. Now, however, I shall speak plainly of it and, with prayer to God, give the best refutations of it that I can, so as to grub out the roots of this idolatrous sect and with God's help, be able to cure certain people of this madness.¹⁵

Despite these kinds of misgivings, these ideas continued to grow in popular religion. The spread of this kind of veneration illustrates the need filled by these particular images of Mary as the ideal yet attainable. The spinning virgin and the dedicated mother gave a cradle-to-the-grave model for women in the empire to relate to. This model had a well-established cultural precedent. Spinning and weaving had long been a staple in Greek literature in creating a model of the feminine ideal. Xenophon pointed out in the fourth century B.C.E. that “the Greeks required a woman to devote herself to the sedentary tranquility of woolwork.”¹⁶ These images were salient on the popular mind for centuries, and gave women of a converted Byzantium a benchmark of a good Christian woman with which to reckon themselves. What seems likely is that the ease and ready adaptation of this model helped to push the popular concepts associated with the Virgin towards the realm of doctrine, creating an awkward cognitive dissonance in the minds of the early fathers, who struggled to maintain the doctrine as they understood it while avoiding the problems like those that would come to plague the tenure of Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople from 428–431 C.E., whose ostensibly heretical Christology would reveal important breaking points with regard to church doctrine on the relationship between Mary, Christ, and Christians. While the western empire would stick to more westernized gospels like the *Pseudo-Gospel of Matthew* and the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* for influence on their art and literature, the *Protoevangelium of James* was of great import in the development of art, architecture, liturgy, and doctrine in the Byzantine world.¹⁷

The Sequence of Events in the Evolution of Constantinople

When Constantine undertook the massive project of reinventing Byzantium to house the ideology of the newly shaped empire as a new kind of Christian Rome, he was careful to tacitly emphasize important cultural elements in his renovations of the city. These renovations included the assimilation of Rome's goddess Fortuna by the Greek equivalent Tyche, syncretized with the goddess Rhea, to whom he built new temples as part of

15. *Panarion* 79.1.6 (Williams).

16. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 1, 3–4.

17. Though there was a great deal of confluence among these Gospels, the stylistic and distinctions and variations in content are illustrative of important regional doctrinal exegeses. David R. Cartlidge and James Keith Elliot, “Mary,” *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*. New York: Routledge 2001.

the Terastoön, which would dominate the cityscape.¹⁸ He also built a large statue of himself which could be seen from all over the city in the image of Helios. These images resonated with relative ethnic comfort to the deme who had for centuries counted on celestial protection. Mindful of the delicate relationship the earlier Emperor Severus had created in Byzantium with his fickle destruction and rebuilding in the second century, Constantine was careful to patronize the popular will and tried to create an imperial identity the Byzantines could relate to. These measures helped facilitate the relative ease with which Byzantines converted culturally into Christianity during this period. They also maintained many of the motifs that would shape that very Christianity.

Later in the mid-fifth century Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople would come to neglect the city's cultural singularity through a redefinition of Mary. Positioned against the stark backdrop of Byzantine ethnocentrism by his own Syrian extraction, Nestorius faced strong opposing tides in navigating the culture that would define the doctrine in this pivotal hub of the eastern world. During the troubled phase of the Nestorian dilemma around 430 C.E., the city came to an ultimatum of identity of the *ethnos*. Nestorius's apparent Christological separation of the divine and human properties of Jesus formed his conception of a Mary who was not as the *Theotokos* the bearer of God, but as the *Christotokos*, the bearer of the man Jesus irreconcilable with the plebeian precedent of veneration:

They make Him (Christ) second to the blessed Mary, and they set the mother against the divine demiurge of time. For if hers is not the nature of man, but God the word, just as they say, with regard to her, then she is not the mother. For how can someone be the mother of a nature completely other than her own? For if she be called mother my them, he is of human nature not divine. For like bears the same essence of every mother. . . . In his nature and essence the Son is the Essence and nature of God the Father, but in the flesh his nature is human from Mary.¹⁹

Much of the opposition against Nestorius came from Aelia Pulcheria, daughter of the Emperor Arcadius (377/8–408) and elder sister of Theodosius II (401–450), who was emperor during the Nestorian dialogue. Pulcheria had taken a vow of virginity to avoid obligatory marriage, and modeled her life after the Virgin Mary. Having a great deal of power both by popularity and by her role in helping her younger brother who assumed the throne as a child, she was able to use the images of the Virgin to rally popular support. Her appeals fell on sympathetic ears was able to gain a much greater following.²⁰ Nestorius was eventually banished and his Christological position was designated heretical by the First Council of Ephesus in 431.²¹

A very significant and popularly syncretized role assumed by the Virgin

18. Lamberis, *Heiress*, 16.

19. Nestorius, *CMP*, vol. 4/1, 2956.

20. Lamberis, *Heiress*, 56.

21. *Third Ecumenical Council*, Canon VII.

was that of the *poliouxos*, or city protector. Here again the historical precedents of the astral motif takes on a significant function. Embedded into the political and cultural memory of the Byzantines was the image of the goddess Hecate, whose astral emblems came to signify the essence of Byzantium. In the fifth century the Byzantine historian Hesychius of Miletus gave in *Patria Konstantinopoleos*, his work on the origins of Constantinople, a legendary account of the resistance of the city to Macedonian influence and the help of Hecate, often syncretized with Cybele and other mother goddesses, who was said to have brought victory to the city, rendering her as its champion.²² To commemorate the victory, the Byzantines minted coins with her emblems, the crescent and star, which remained symbols of the empire until adopted by Islam and the modern Turkish state, whose efforts towards establishing legitimacy included assimilation of important historical symbols in religious and national symbols. This role was later assumed by Mary. The *Akathist Hymn*, which places the *Theotokos* squarely in the position of municipal custodian, contains the following passage, written as a rally and entreaty to the *Theotokos* to protect the city against a Eurasian Avar attack:

Unto you, O Theotokos, invincible champion,
Your city, in thanksgiving ascribes the victory for the deliverance from sufferings.
And having your might unassailable,
free me from all dangers, so that I may cry
unto you: Hail! O bride unwedded.²³

The astral and celestial themes also present themselves once again in this hymn with the words: “Hail! O star revealing the sun” and “Hail! O ray of Mystical sun.”²⁴

Having come full circle in its conceptions of self-identity in relation to deity, the city of Constantinople was in its civic history a reflection of the political, cultic, and social ideas that made up daily life in the city. The efforts of the citizens to reach the divine and in doing so reaching some kernel of self-examination and self-definition are demonstrative of the power of the civic need for affirmation. Whether that affirmation came as a reflection of daily tasks such as weaving, a desire to comprehend that which is beyond a veil of heaven, or as a hopeful entreaty for divine protection, it was easily evinced by the Byzantines by the devotion to parts of their own ethnic identity. Institutional veneration merely provided the vehicle for that devotion, and where institutional measures are were able to be reconciled, those measures, as is often the case, can become subject to change via the facile elicitation of the precedented—the conventional—the orthodox.

22. Hesychius of Miletus, *Patria Konstantinopoleos*, 11.

23. *Akathistos Hymn* verse 1, Limberis *Heiress*, 153.

24. *Akathistos Hymn*, verses 1, 20.