Divine Duality: Exploring the Intersection of Gender, Transcendence, and Salvation in an Early Christian Icon

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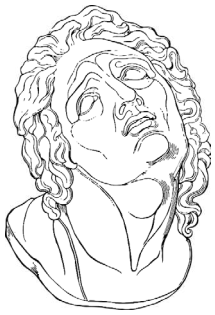
The celebrated icon *Enthroned Mother of God with Angels and Saints* (Fig. 1, c. sixth – early seventh century) from Saint Catherine's monastery on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt is considered one of the earliest examples of a Marian icon. Scholarship has focused on the diversity of technical styles utilised for each figure in the image, interpreting them as distinctions between heavenly and earthly bodies. But what if we were to take these interpretations further by analysing the figures in this encaustic painting as embodying the evolving theological interpretations of the *androgyne* during late Antiquity? Could such an approach tell us more about the icon's message of salvation and the gendered notions of a body and a soul, as understood by the ascetic monastic viewer?

Figure 1. Enthroned Mother of God with Angels and Saints, sixth or early seventh century, encaustic on wood, 68.5 x 49.5 cm. Sinai, Egypt, Saint Catherine's Monastery. © Saint Catherine's Monastery.



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The later Roman and early Byzantine period (specifically the third – seventh century CE) marked a crucial phase in the development of a Christian discourse on the body and its social, cultural, and religious implications. Marked by the influence of Constantine the Great and the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE), this era witnessed the shaping of theological doctrines and the governance of the Church through the Ecumenical Councils. The Edict of Thessalonica (380 CE) further underscored the fusion of religious and political power, resulting in the subsequent establishment of Nicene Christianity as the state church.[1] Nicene Christianity adheres to the belief that Jesus is the divine incarnation of God, united with God the Father and the Holy Spirit as part of the Holy Trinity, where the three consubstantial manifestations are unified in the one God. Trinitarianism functioned as a vehicle for salvation through creation in the Father, faith in the Holy Spirit, and redemption in Christ the Son.[2] Early Christian theologians grappled with philosophies of salvation entrenched in the gendered dualities between the cerebral and the corporeal, the divine and the earthly, and sin and redemption, which humans could only reconcile with reunification in God through the transcendence of oppositions, categorised into the masculine and the feminine.

A Judaic Midrashic tradition formulated in Late Antiquity interpreted the passages on the creation of humankind as described in the book of Genesis. This work, *Genesis Rabbah* (*Bereshith Rabbah* in Hebrew), contained rabbinical commentary which understood the first human as an androgynous being that God subsequently divided into male and female.[3]

> R. Jeremiah b. Leazar said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He created him an hermaphrodite [bi-sexual], for it is said, Male and female created He them and called their name Adam (Gen. v, 2). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: When the Lord created Adam He created him double-faced, then He split him and made him of two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side. (Gen. 11, 21)[4]

The concept of the *androgyne* was extended to include the spiritual aspect of humankind. In the fourth century, the bishop of Milan, Ambrose, asserted the soul is androgynous. Stating in his text (*Cain and Abel*, 1.47 CSEL), Ambrose translates the words of Isaiah as follows:

> ... [L]et us turn to an examination of what is proper to the soul. There is no question that we have to deal here with something that is without sex, yet it fulfils all the offices of both sexes in that the soul conceives and, as in marriage, gives birth. Nature provides woman with a womb in which a living person is brought to birth in the course of time. Such, too, is that characteristic of the soul which is ready to receive in its womb-like recesses the seeds of our thoughts, to cherish them and to bring them forth as a woman gives birth to a child. This and no other is the meaning of the words of [Isaiah]: 'We have conceived and brought forth the spirit of salvation.' Some of these conceptions are associated with the female sex, such as malice of thought, petulance, sensuality, self-indulgence, immodesty, and other vices of that nature which tend to enervate the traits associated with what is distinctively masculine. These last are the virtues of chastity, patience, wisdom, temperance, fortitude, and justice, which make it possible for our minds and bodies to struggle with zeal and confidence in our pursuit of virtue. These are the conceptions to which the Prophet [Isaiah] referred in the words, 'We have conceived and brought forth the spirit of salvation,' that is to say, the characteristic masculine traits conceived and gave birth to the spirit of salvation.[5]

Ambrose interprets salvation as the unity of the masculine and feminine. However, he still posits a distinction between male and female characteristics, assigning disparaging traits to the female sex while the virtuous traits are "distinctively masculine."

Later in the fifth century, Augustine, a student of Ambrose, reinterpreted these notions of the androgynous soul. Traditional exegesis of Augustine's texts acknowledges his philosophy of duality that categorises human identities into two distinct "orders," that of the "spiritual" and the "natural," two elements composed in one body.[6] Augustine believed that it is the human spirit (intellect) that was created in the image of God, as opposed to the natural form (body) of humans.[7] According to Augustine, the spiritual order transcends gender, uniting the masculine and feminine in everlasting divinity. The natural order is a transient, earthly state in which the societal structuring of human existence on earth defines the separate roles of men and women.[8]

In the seventh century, the ascetic monk Maximus the Confessor explicated another philosophy on creationism. Drawing on the writings of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus's work *Ambiguum 41* presents a cosmology in which God builds the universe through five primordial divides, beginning with the division between creator and creation and ending with the division between male and female.[9] According to Maximus, humans must unite these five divisions in ascending order until reaching the highest unity of the creator and creation through human deification. Maximus's theory moves beyond his predecessors, asserting that by "removing the difference between male and female," Christ united humanity in Himself through the incarnation, transfiguring human beings to the uncorrupted likeness of God.[10] These early concepts of transcending gender through the spiritual reunification with God will form the basis of the analysis of the figures in the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon.

Located at the foot of Mount Sinai, "at the very place where God appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush," Saint Catherine's, one of the oldest extant monasteries, possesses a remarkable collection of icons from the sixth through the ninth centuries, including this encaustic, wood panel painting measuring 27″ in height, and 19.5″ in width.[11] Renowned as one of the most notable examples in the collection, the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon portrays the Virgin Mary seated on a throne, holding the Christ child. She is flanked on both sides by Saint George on Her left and Saint Theodore on Her right. Above this group of figures, two angels look heavenward towards the celestial plane, from which God's hand is extended in blessing. At the heart of the composition sits the golden-haloed figure of the Christ child dressed in garments of gold with His right hand extended in a gesture of speech.

The limited colour palette of this icon is dominated by gold, with transparent white, varying shades of purple, and a rich violet-blue, primarily reserved for the Virgin's robes. The colour theory of the icon has a biblical origin stemming from *Exodus*, where God commands Moses to instruct the Israelites "to bring to the Lord an offering of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen" (Exodus 35:5–6 NIV) as material for the construction of the Tabernacle. In the icon, Mary is seated on a golden throne, wearing a veiled gown of deep purplish blue with scarlet-hued footwear peeking out from beneath the hem of Her garments. On Her right, Saint Theodore is wearing the traditional costume of an imperial dignitary with a white *chlamys* over a purple tunic. Across from him, Saint George's attire is reversed, with a white tunic covered by a purple *chlamys*. The four central figures of Mary, the Christ child and the two saints have prominent golden halos, while the two ethereal angels in the rear are painted translucent white.

The figures are formed in a classical style rooted in Roman traditions, with sculpted physiognomies and the suggestion of physical form beneath the delicate drapery of fabrics. This captivating artwork skilfully guides the viewer through spiritual ascension, drawing attention to the interconnectedness of the earthly and divine realms. As will be seen, the visual upward movement from the stoic saints to the eternal hand of God captures the essence of transcendence, inviting contemplation of the sacred. The portrayal of differing appearances and the hierarchy of figures within the composition create a profound narrative, engaging the viewer in a complete cosmos from the earthly to the heavenly realm.

First studied in the 1950s by art historians Georgios and Maria Sotiriou, the icons from Sinai represent the most extensive extant collection of Byzantine icons in the world.[12] Georgios Sotiriou was the first scholar to remark upon the juxtaposition of realistic and abstracted styles at work in portraying the figures in the icon, equating this to a combination of Greek, Pompeian, and Syrian traditions. He further describes the representation of the *Theotokos* as the "throne of God," symbolising the mystery of the incarnation achieved through divine grace as represented by the Christ child.[13] Similarly, Ernst Kitzinger comments on the varying stylistic techniques, comparing the ethereal quality of the angels to frescoes found in Pompeii.[14] Kurt Weitzmann interpreted these stylistic differences as emblematic of the divine or human nature of the figures portrayed in the artwork, exemplifying the differences in pallor between the warrior saints, the angels, and the Virgin and Child, as distinguishing between their earthly and heavenly status.[15] Taking a slightly different approach, Hans Belting focuses on the forms used to depict different figures, suggesting that the open forms of the angels demonstrate movement through space, in contrast to the statuesque forms of the saints, which ground them in the earthly realm.[16] More recently, Katherine Marsengill further discusses the juxtaposition of Hellenistic and abstract styles in the Sinai icons, viewing the collection as exemplifying a shift in Byzantine artists' approach to subjects, contexts, and purpose.[17]

Other influential scholarly research of the collection focuses on the potential sources for the iconography, such as Thomas Mathews' 2016 book *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons*, which places the origin sources of early Christian imagery in pagan icons, arguing that this connection presents a "smooth continuity in cultic forms and uses between the ancient polytheist panels and Christian icons."[18] Kathleen Corrigan offers another interpretation suggesting that the early icons attempted to "figure out how to represent the relationship between the human and divine aspects of Christ, without falling into the error of idolatry."[19]

Building upon this previous scholarship, this article moves beyond formal, iconographic visual analysis to explore early Christian theories on the *androgyne* as embodied in the figures represented in the icon. Furthermore, the discussion will focus on the icon's message of salvation and the gendered notions of the body and soul as understood in gnostic and biblical texts, interpreting the icon as a vehicle for meditation and transcendence for the monastic viewer.

The iconography of this painting provides an opportunity to further discuss the ideas of gender duality in the dogma of the early Christian religion through the figures represented. This article will explore the gendered, salvific symbolism of the Christian figures portrayed in the icon as they would have been perceived by the monks who were venerating them. Examining the three archetypes of figures in the painting — the Virgin and Child, the warrior Saints, and the two angels, this paper will analyse the dual nature of the gender characteristics of the figures through the early Christian concept of the *androgyne* and their meanings for their monastic audience.

The origin of the image of the *androgyne* stems from ancient philosophies. Greek myth describes the original human form as an androgynous being encompassing both male and female in one body.[20] In early Christianity, this unification of the opposite sexes was a prime symbol of salvation, as understood in the baptismal rite quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:28 NRSV: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."[21] These early Christians believed themselves reunified in God through salvation and, thus, restored to a pure, original state of humanity.[22] In this context, Christ could be seen to embody both the masculine and the feminine, marrying His humanity with His divine nature.

This gender duality originates from early Christian practices where the human body held significance as a locus for sacred rituals and religious values.[23] Gendered characteristic traits were associated with the physical and sexual anatomies of men and women, giving rise to specific ideologies and devotions based on the body for Christian practitioners.[24] Early Christian writers and artists often drew upon physical and sexual distinctions and the gender-related connotations stemming from these differences as a frequent scheme in their imagery. In her essay "'I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," Elizabeth Castelli points out:

> Masculine and feminine, male and female, man and woman are not always self-evident and parallel categories in ancient discourses. That is, the categories are certainly fixed, and further are arranged in a hierarchal dualism whereby masculine/male/man are in ascendancy over their opposites. There exists occasions, however, when qualities of masculinity may inhere in the persons of biological females ("women") or characteristics of femininity in the persons of "men."[25]

For early Christians, this fluidity of gendered characteristics made mutable through Christ for salvation was an accepted means for achieving "oneness" with God. However, as Castelli cautions, it is important to recognise that many gnostic texts establish a hierarchy of masculine (incorporeal/superior) over feminine (corporeal/inferior) characteristics, suggesting that the female "element" must elevate to male but not vice versa.[26]

Further complicating these issues of gender was the metaphor of the Church as a "spouse" of God. Deep-rooted Judeo-Christian convention construes the connection between God and the individuals who worship and adore Him as akin to a marriage. The Church, in this analogy, is the mortal spouse (*sponsa*), and God/Jesus is the heavenly bridegroom (*Sponsus*). The biblical source for this allegory stems from the Song of Songs.[27] Sometimes referred to as the Song of Solomon, early Rabbinic Judaism interpreted this Hebrew Bible poem as a metaphor for the relationship between God and the people of Israel.[28] This allegorical interpretation was subsequently adopted by Christians as a pronouncement of God's love for his Church, both as a community and as individuals. Origen was among the first Christian scholars to interpret it this way, while Saint Gregory of Nyssa drew parallels between the bride as an allegory for the soul and the unseen groom representing God. The Song of Songs uses a gendered language with traditionally female pronouns and physical attributes of the maiden bride. However, Gregory interprets it as an analogy whereby the "bride" is the human soul that must transmute in three stages of spiritual growth from the vain to the sanctified to enter a "marriage" with God:

> I testify thus as one who is about to treat the mystical vision contained in the Song of Songs. For by what is written there, the soul is, in a certain manner, led as a bride toward an incorporeal and spiritual and undefiled marriage with God.[29]

This reading of the Song dismisses any literal concept of gender by understanding the characters in an allegorical context. Yet Gregory later refers to the "female species of thought" as "lower," "irrational," and to be discarded and left behind with the "material" to facilitate an initiation to divine wisdom, thus continuing the gendered hierarchal tradition of the incorporeal masculine over the corporeal feminine.[30]

Similarly, in his ascetic tracts, the seventh-century theologian Isaac of Nineveh posits that those who have renounced all earthly things and devote themselves to prayer achieve "mastership over all created natures."[31] This mastery is a transcendence of the incorporeal (masculine) over the corporeal (feminine). Additionally, Isaac refers to the ascetics as "those who walk in the discipline of knowledge" and warns of the "various ways in which Satan wars against those who tread the narrow way which is above the world," often appearing in the

form of a naked woman to tempt them from their righteous path.[32] Once again, the virtue of knowledge, which is heavenly, has an implied masculine nature that Satan tempts in the guise of a feminine image.

For the monks of this early Christian period, the practice of asceticism had its foundations in this ideology involving the Christian concept of sin and redemption, which was grounded in the gendered doctrine of "sin" as feminine (Eve) and "redemption" as masculine (Christ as Son). This is rooted in the Apostolic Fathers' interpretation of *The Fall* in *Genesis* and the *First Epistle to Timothy*, where Paul the Apostle states, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Timothy 2:13–14 ESV). Eve's role within that narrative casts "the woman" as the evildoer and corrupter of Adam. In the context of these gendered canons of the early Church, this raises the question: how would the early Christian monastic audience of the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon have reconciled the problematic feminine in their veneration of the Virgin Mary? Averil Cameron posits in her essay "The Early Cult of the Virgin" that during the theological debates of the fourth century, "it was Mary who was seen as having made possible the union of two natures in Christ."[33] For the monastic ascetics, Mary represented an exemplary model of virginity, which, through the ascetic practice of abstinence, the monks could emulate, ascending to divine spirituality.[34]

In addition to Mary as an emblem of divine purity, her status as the Mother of God played a central role in the divine economy of salvation in late antiquity. As early as the third century, Mary was given the title of *Theotokos*, deriving from the Greek Θεός [*Theo*], meaning "God," and τόκος [*Tokos*], meaning "childbirth." Scholars have suggested that the iconography of the seated Madonna and Child derives from images of Isis and Horus (Fig. 2, 664 – 630 B.C.), adopting the Egyptian god's stature as the divine mother of the Pharaoh into the Marian iconography of Mary as the "Mother of God."[35] This title emphasised Her feminine quality of motherhood and elevated Her to a position of divinity as the bearer of the Savior Jesus Christ while defining Her role as an actor in salvation.

Figure 2. Isis and Horus, 664–630 B.C., cupreous metal, precious metal inlay, 19.6 x 6.6 x 7.3 cm. Egypt © The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Further identifying Her place in the salvation narrative was the parallel drawn between Mary and Eve as interpreted by the early Church Fathers. In this context, Mary was the "new" Eve in that She was giving birth to a new era as the Mother of God.[36] For early Christian practitioners, this correlation exemplified the recreation of the world with Mary supplanting Eve as the first woman.[37] Mary was seen as the redeeming contrast to Eve by replacing the latter's disobedience with Her obedience, transcending the sinful feminine nature of the *fallen* woman. In the second century, the Greek cleric Iraneus defined this parallel writing:

> And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed [namely, Eve] that mankind was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin [Mary], who obeyed the word of God, that mankind, resuscitated by life, received life.[38]

Additionally, the conclusion of the *Life of the Virgin*, attributed to Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century, contains a hymn to the "graces and benevolences of the holy and ever-virgin Theotokos," which enumerates the following attributes among the multitude of Her blessings:

> She is the resurrection of the fallen Adam.
> She is the destruction of Eve's tears.
> She is the comforter of those who mourn.
> She is the throne of the king, who bears the one who bears all.
> She is the one who renews the old world.[39]

This image of the Virgin would have served as a pathway to salvation for a monastic audience meditating on the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon.

Despite this view of Mary as a redeemer and the bearer of Christ, the female gender was still rendered subordinate to men. As can be seen in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Mary Magdalene was considered "unworthy" of inclusion among the followers of Christ. In logion 114 of the *text*, the disciple Simon Peter questions her "appropriateness" in association with the group:

> Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life."
> Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."[40]

The notion that maleness is related to salvation and femaleness to that of sin is a concept that the monks viewing the icon of the *Enthroned Mother of God* would have understood. The idea that women needed to "become male" to ascend to the divine nature of God and, therefore, receive salvation, in some ways, corresponded to the ascetic practices of the monks. According to the *Benedictine Rule*, written by Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century, the gender dynamics of ascetic philosophy dictated that "language elevates monks to a masculine, spiritual arena; the body moves them down into a labile, feminine register."[41] As such, the practice of asceticism was to rid oneself of the sinful impulses of the body, which were directly associated with the sinfulness of the "feminine." In this way, the monks meditating on this icon would have understood this as transcending gender in the emulation of God.

Following the principle of cerebral as masculine and corporeal as female, the figure of Mary, as represented in the icon, serves a multivalent didactic purpose. The representation of the icon is a Byzantine type known as *Nicopoia*. In these depictions, the Virgin and Child are seated on a throne, often surrounded by angels or saints. Mary holds Christ on Her lap with Her left hand on His left leg and Her right hand on His right shoulder in a gesture of presentation to the viewer. Here, Mary is acting as the throne of Christ and the purveyor of Divine Wisdom. In the *Life of the Virgin*, Maximus praises Her as such, stating, "She is the holy throne of the

one seated on the cherubim... She is the one receiving the Wisdom of God."[42] In this manner, Mary is both Mother and vessel to the incarnation of the Divine Word.

Two other enthroned Virgin images can serve as comparisons to the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon stylistically and compositionally. The first is the *Tomb of Widow Turtura* fresco in the Catacomb of Commodilla in Rome (Fig. 3, 525-535 CE). This fresco resembles the iconography, artistic style and composition of the Sinai icon. The *Theotokos* is seated on a jewel-encrusted golden throne flanked by two martyred saints (Saints Felix and Adauctus). Here, the Virgin presents Christ in the gesture of the *Nicopoia* iconographic type. This fresco also utilises a similar colour palette with tones of gold, blue, purple and crimson, with the Madonna and Child and the two saints adorned with large golden halos. The widow Turtura stands to the right of Mary, smaller in stature than the other figures. The hierarchy of bodies in the composition creates an inward and upward motion similar to the Sinai icon.

The second comparative image is the Madonna della Clemenza icon from The Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere (Fig. 4, late sixth – eighth century). This encaustic icon is an iconographical type known as Maria Regina, which portrays the Virgin as the Empress of Heaven. Characterisations of this type represent the Virgin dressed in the garb of a Byzantine Empress. The panel painting presents the Theotokos wearing a purple dalmatic with decorated maniakon and a jewel-encrusted crown with strands of pearls in the Byzantine empirical style. The remnants of Her red shoes are barely visible in the heavily damaged lower register of the painting. Two angels frame the figure of the Virgin clad in blue tunics covered with white robes. Golden halos adorn the four central figures, completing the predominantly gold, blue, purple and crimson colour scheme.

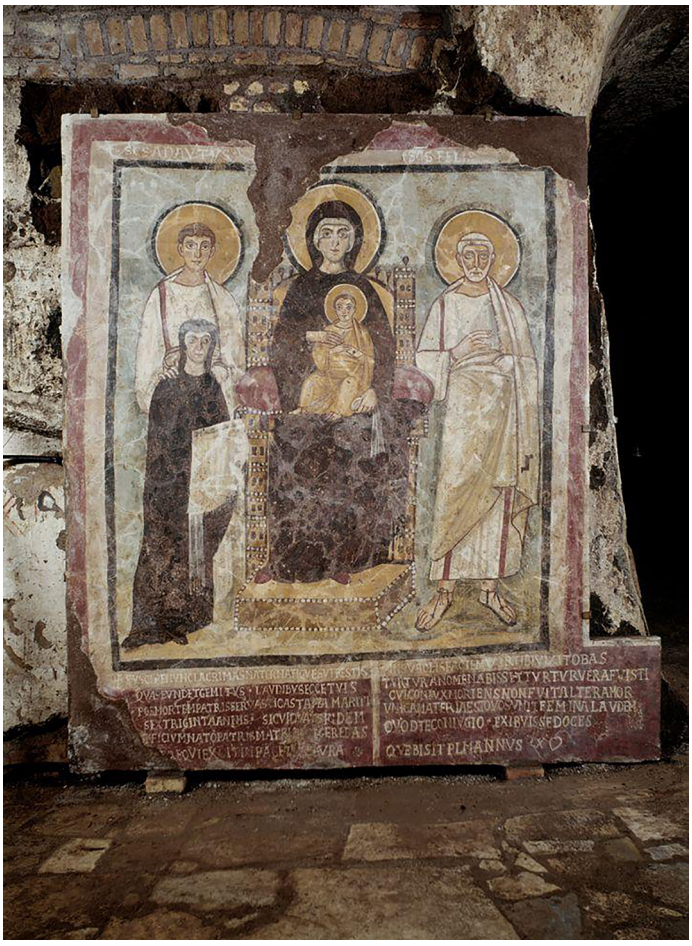

Figure 3. (left) Tomb of Widow Turtura (Virgin and Child between Saints Felix and Damian), 525–535 CE, fresco. Rome, Italy, Catacomb of Commodilla. © Photo Scala, Florence.

Figure 4. (right)Madonna della Clemenza, late sixth-eighth century, encaustic on wood, 164 x 116 cm. Rome, Italy, The Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere. © Photo Scala, Florence

A 1950s restoration project of this icon revealed an additional figure of a kneeling pope and also a cross in the right hand of the Virgin.[43] The overall composition resembles the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon, with the two angels leaning diagonally outward with their rods creating an inverted triangle that frames the Virgin and Child, opening the figures towards the ascension to Heaven.

Ally Kateusz presents an intriguing argument that some depictions of Mary in the first centuries of Christianity refer to an early narrative that positions Mary in the role of a priest.[44] In her chapter "Introduction to Mary as High Priest in Early Christian Narratives and Iconography," Kateusz points to the Eucharistic cloth in Mary's left hand in the fresco from the Catacomb of Commodilla, arguing that this symbolises the narrative of Mary as Priest. Kateusz effectively demonstrates how many early texts, particularly the *Protevangelium of James*, place the Annunciation in the Holy of Holies within the Temple, a sacred place reserved for Priests.[45] Similarly, the cross in Mary's hand in the *Madonna della Clemenza* symbolises Her close connection to the redemptive mission of Christ. *The Life of the Virgin* also presents Mary as a constant companion in Jesus' mission and as a leader of the early Christian Church after the death of Jesus.[46] These accounts position her as a model that transcends traditional gender roles.

In the three images, Mary is not just a central figure but a unifying force that brings humankind closer to the divine. She is an intercessor, a vehicle of transcendence inhabiting the space between the earthly and divine. The composition of the *Enthroned Mother of God* particularly emphasises this role. The entire design moves the viewer inward through Christ and upward through the light of the angels to the Hand of God, reinforcing the sense of unity and transcendence that Mary facilitates.

The most remarkable difference between this icon and the other two examples is the engagement of the figures with the audience. In the *Tomb of the Widow Turtura* fresco and the *Madonna della Clemenza* icon, all the Holy figures look out toward the spectator. However, in the *Enthroned Mother of God*, the Virgin, Christ and angels avert their gaze. Only the figures of Saints Theodore and George directly engage the viewer. They stand erect, boldly engaging the viewer's gaze while holding their golden crosses to their breasts, symbolising the resurrection of Christ and their status as martyrs.[47] Their gaze is hypnotic and intentional, facilitating meditation. In his *Mystic Treatises*, Nineveh devotes a passage to reflecting on the penitent's inward and outward gaze:

> [H]e whose uprightness of heart renders chaste the gaze of his mind, so that he does not audaciously enter upon lascivious thoughts, and the saintliness of his heart is testified by the gaze of his pupils, which are guarded faithfully... So that his purity, like that of a chaste virgin, is faithfully guarded for Christ.[48]

The two iconic warrior saints of the East, Saint Theodore and Saint George, were Roman soldiers martyred for their refusal to recant their Christian faith, with both their legends involving the slaying of dragons. This archetype of the warrior saint is a metaphor for the saints' commitment to the struggle against evil.[49] Depictions of this paradigm commonly represent the fearless combatant on horseback vanquishing a dragon or serpent. However, predating the legends of dragon-slaying Saints Theodore and George is that of a female devil vanquishing martyr from North Africa in the third century, Saint Perpetua. In this narrative, Perpetua defeats the devil in the guise of an Egyptian man and a dragon by trampling on its head. What is most interesting about this early version of a female dragon-slaying saint is the gendered language attributed to her testimony of prophetic visions. She initially declares, "I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me. My clothes were stripped off and I was suddenly a man."[50] Later in the account, the Egyptian is replaced with a dragon, which is also vanquished by Perpetua's foot treading on its head as she climbs the ladder to heaven.[51] This

martyr story perpetuates the narrative of transcending gender to achieve salvation. Perpetua "becomes male" to vanquish the devil and ascend to heaven.

This iconographic theme, as retold through Saints Theodore and George, is visually represented in two-panel paintings of the Saints, also from the Saint Catherine monastery (Fig. 5, ninth – tenth century). These two panels, believed to be sections from a triptych, present the two warrior saints mounted on horseback while trampling the enemy underfoot. On the left panel, Saint Theodore rides his steed over the figure of an immense serpent while impaling the creature with the staff of his cross. Saint George is depicted trampling on a human, potentially representing the Roman emperor Diocletian, whom Christians demonised for his role in the Great Persecution of 302 CE.[52]

Figure 5 The Warrior-Saints Theodore of Amasea and George Mounted, Conquering their Enemies, ninth or tenth century, encaustic on wood, left panel: 38.6 x 13 cm, right panel: 38.6 x 13.5 cm. Sinai, Egypt, Saint Catherine's Monastery. © Saint Catherine's Monastery

Both saints don the uniform of a Roman soldier, identifiable by their short tunics, armbands, and leather aprons. In contrast, the saints in the *Enthroned Mother of God* wear ankle-length tunics of soft fabric covered by *chlamydes*, a long swath of fabric fastened by a *fibula* on the right shoulder and draped over the left. Adorning their *chlamydes* are *tablion*, rectangular textile panels on the front of the garment, as was traditional in Byzantine courtly fashion. During this period, in visual culture, the emperor was traditionally depicted wearing purple *chlamys* with gold *tablion*, while white *chlamydes* with purple *tablion* distinguished the position of the dignitaries.[53] In *Icons and Power*, Bissera Pentcheva argues for an imperial reading of the icon based on the civic costume of the saints.[54] Pentcheva describes the image as a *Theotokos strategos*, an image type invoked to ensure victory on the battlefield.[55] However, the icon's location at Saint Catherine's monastery suggests its function more likely served a devotional purpose.[56]

To the monastic audience of this icon, the martyrdom of these saints would have corresponded to their ascetic beliefs. The torture and execution of both saints correlate to the ascetic practice of sacrifice and bodily mutilation, suppressing the corrupt, banal (feminine) aspect of humanity. As such, the monks would have found a mirror of their identities in the comparable symbols of sacrifice and redemption embodied by these saints.

The last grouping for discussion is the pairing of the two angels in the icon's background. Numerous artistic interpretations of biblical texts have misconstrued the androgynous nature attributed to angels.[57] This archetype of the androgynous angelic being derives from passages in the Bible where angels were defined as pure spirits without a definition of form that would identify them as either masculine or feminine.[58] However, in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, where angels have appeared in human form, they are portrayed as having a masculine guise with traditionally male pronouns, as in the case of Archangels Gabriel and Michael.

In late Antiquity, Evagrius Ponticus, the late fourth-century Christian monk and theologian, defined angels as a class of "rational beings," meaning all creatures separate from the mystery of God. In *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, Ellen Muehlberger summarises Evagrius' theory of angels:

> According to Evagrius, human beings could, depending on their attention to the development of the *nous*, an intellectual faculty, become more like angels and thus begin their return to complete unity with God.[59]

Augustine presents an alternative angelic theory. In his writings, Augustine portrays the angels as divine creatures of light inhabiting The City of God, existing before the natural world and belonging to the "spiritual" rather than the "natural" order.[60]

Early Egyptian and Syrian texts envisioned asceticism as transcendent and particularly as a manifestation of an 'angelic' existence. Monastics from the Egyptian desert, such as Evagrius, and Syriac monastic authors like Aphrahat proposed that, to a degree, a diligent ascetic would attain a state akin to that of an angel.[61]

The angels in the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon distinctly differ from the figures in the foreground. With their light monochrome visages, they are ethereal and almost appear to dissolve into the background of the painting. Both angels hold golden rods positioned in two diagonals that draw the viewer's eye to the central figure of Christ. Between them, a beam of light extending from the hand of God illuminates the figures of the Madonna and the Christ child. This visualisation of the light of God illustrates saying 83 from the *Gospel of Thomas*, where Jesus declares, "The light of the Father will reveal itself, but His image will remain concealed by His light."[62] In this manner, the light is connecting God the Father to His Son,

revealing Himself in the incarnation of Christ, while the image of God remains concealed in radiance. The angels reside in the realm of light, connecting the figures below them to the realm of the divine. Portrayed as emblems of the "spiritual" order, the angels represent the gateway to the ideal found in Christ. To the monastic viewers of this icon, their angelic perfection served as the model they were striving to achieve on the pathway to reunification with the divine.

The gender dualities ensconced within the archetypes in the *Enthroned Mother of God* icon can serve as a visual interpretation of the complex ideologies associated with the identity of cerebral/corporeal, earthly/heavenly, and male/female, as reconciled in unity with the divine. The quest for the androgynous wholeness of early Christians' corporeal and ethereal natures brought them closer to God and deemed them worthy of salvation.

According to biblical historian Wayne Meeks, "The task of "making the two one," especially "the male and the female," is a prominent theme in the *Gospel of Thomas*,"[63] which served as an integral part of the doctrine of the monks of this period. In addition to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Meeks asserts that the image of the *androgyne* as the nature of "primal man" was of particular interest to the Gnostics, stating that "In a number of gnostic systems, the division between male and female is the fundamental symbol or even the mythical source of the human plight, and consequently their reunification represents or effects man's salvation."[64] As we have seen, this construct of salvation is at the core of the iconography operating in the *Enthroned Mother of God with Angels and Saints* panel.

The visual analysis of this icon offers a compelling lens to examine the symbolism of redemption prevalent in early Christian art. The figural imagery operating in this painting not only reflects the complexities of gender dualities and spiritual transcendence but also embodies the evolving theological interpretations of the *androgyne* during late Antiquity.

The theologies of late Antiquity and early Christianity found their basis in ancient and gnostic discourses on the creation of humans and their relationship to the divine. Early Judaic and Christian philosophers interpreted these texts, expounding on the creation of humanity, the nature of angels, the categorisation of human identities, and the spiritual path to reunification with God. In an early Christian context, divine reintegration could only occur when the ignoble feminine ascended to the intellectual masculine.

The portrayal of the Virgin and Child, the warrior Saints, and the angels prompts a profound exploration of the complexities of gender and the ascetic principles and notions of salvation deeply ingrained in early Christian practices. The hypostatic union of Christ as God and human within the icon serves as a powerful metaphor for the unity of the spiritual and natural orders, emblematic of the broader Christian discourse on the body and its significance within the religious and cultural spheres.

Furthermore, the representation of the angels as ethereal beings, embodying the spiritual realm and connecting the earthly figures to the divine, underscores their role as guides in the ascetic journey towards unity with God. Created as beings of light, early Christians understood them as incorporeal, existing before the creation of humans and, therefore, predating conceptions of gender.

Ultimately, this discussion sheds light on the intricate symbolism and theological underpinnings of this early Christian artwork and highlights the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary religious and gender discourse. As we reflect on these representations and their historical and cultural significance, we are encouraged to explore further the intersections of spirituality, gender, and artistic expression, offering new perspectives that resonate with our modern understanding of these timeless concepts.

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