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AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND
EARLY BYZANTINE ERA



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EARLY BYZANTINE ERA

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[1] Στα λόγια μου ας είναι
μάρτυρες όλοι οι παντοτινοί.

[2] Ότι λευκός ήταν ο κόσμος
ώσπου ν' ακουστεί η φωνή του
βασιλιά Τελεστή
όταν διέταξε: ας γίνει!

[3] Και όλα τα ουράνια
σώματα ενώθηκαν και
σχημάτισαν μεγάλη σφραγίδα
όμοια με σφυρί και άστραψε ο
ουρανός και στροβιλίστηκαν
τα νέφη.

[...]

[7] Κι έπαψε να 'ναι διάφανος
ο κόσμος και φανερώθηκε.

[8] Και είδε ο Ταξιδευτής και
θαύμασε και θέλησε ν' αφήσει
και να πάρει.

[...]

[11] Και για πάντα συνέχισε
την θεϊκή του πορεία, νέα
μονοπάτια ανοίγοντας.

FROM JUPITER TO JESUS?

FROM JUPITER TO JESUS?

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE IMPERIAL CULT OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT¹

MARK BEUMER²

Abstract

The present article discusses the so called “conversion” of Constantine the Great, by using numismatics in relation to personal depictions of Constantine. It will be argued that Constantine never converted until his deathbed and that he favoured the Christians from a political standpoint to obtain their support for his laws and reign. His reign is characterized by ritual dynamics, in which Constantine switched between Apollo and Jesus, but was a convinced polytheist until he died.

Keywords: *Constantine the Great, Christianity, conversion, ritual dynamics*

Imperial cult is probably one of the most difficult aspects of ancient Rome. Its roots lie in ancient Egypt and the Greek cult of the rulers. Pharaohs who receive the kingship of Horus and Greek rulers such as Alexander the Great have set the tone for personal divine worship, feeling chosen by their (guardian) gods. The idea that a person would be divine or even become a god would now be considered as madness. Roman emperors implemented Jupiter and Hercules in an ideology strongly reminiscent of a father-son relationship is not surprising. An invincible sun god also became part of the imperial cult of various rulers such as Aurelian and Constantine the Great. Apollo, Helios, Sol, and, even, Christ feature prominently here. In this essay, Constantine the Great will be the central person, as he is one of the sharpest figures in history. He is

¹ This article is an English and revised edition of my earlier published article “Van Jupiter tot Jezus. De keizercultus van Constantijn de Grote nader bekeken”, in: *Kleio-Historia*, 2 (2015), pp. 21-28. I thank Mrs Zoe Tsiami for the opportunity to publish it in the new peer-reviewed journal *After Constantine: Stories from the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Era*.

² Mark Beumer is an ancient historian and is specialized in Greek religion and medicine. Currently, he is working on a PhD-thesis about the Christian transformation of temple sleep in Late Antiquity from the perspective of ritual studies/dynamics and ecological anthropology.

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said to have been the first Christian emperor because of a vision from God. After this, he would convert into Christianity. This is just the question; the literature remains vague about this. On the one hand, Constantine is portrayed as a pagan emperor,³ who used Christianity only for personal empowerment; yet, on the other hand, we see him as a deeply Christian emperor who renounced all non-Christian matters. What is true about these statements? In this context, I will argue that Constantine was never in fact a Christian emperor and that he can easily be placed in the old traditional way of imperial cult, which is still confirmed within historiography.⁴

Jupiter-Hercules

The representation of imperial power gradually changed in the third century. The old performance ideology, namely the gaining of legitimating the power through *res gestae*, is no longer possible and the dynastic continuity lapsed after 235, and resulted in a link to all kinds of gods and an ideological elevation of emperorship. Jupiter and Hercules became important as powers behind the throne around 253, but other deities were also given a place such as Sol Invictus.⁵ Diocletian (284-305) and Maxentius (278-312) took the titles *Jovius* and *Herculius* during Diocletian's reign; Diocletian was a senior and Maxentius a junior. This explains the title; It is different with Constantius (250-306) and Galerius (306-311), where the senior is Constantius *Herculius* and Galerius is *Jovius*. Mattingly adds that Diocletian recognized Jupiter as the greatest god and that he and Maxentius were under the protection of Jupiter and Hercules. Mattingly further indicates that Constantius and Galerius in 293 recognized Mars and Sol as guardian gods. It must be realized that the titles *Jovius* and *Herculius* do not mean identification with these gods.⁶ Diocletian recognized Jupiter as the best god and he and Maxentius were placing themselves under the protection of Jupiter and Hercules. Constantius and

³ From the 4th century AD onwards the word “pagan” arose and means “non-Christian” and can be seen as a successor to the term “ancient”. I am aware of the debate that is taking place about the meaning of these concepts in relation to each other. See Lössl and Baker-Brian 2018, pp. 61-80, 391-410; Sággy and Schoolman 2017, pp. 59-68; Salzman, Sággy, Testa 2016, pp. 115-138. In this paper, I will use the term “non-Christian”.

⁴ Van Dam 2009, pp. 10-11, 128; Roldanus 2006, p. 36; Van Dam 2011, p. 15; Bardill 2012, pp. 218-219.

⁵ De Blois 2007, pp. 2-3.

⁶ Drinkwater 2005, p.71.

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Galerius also recognized Mars and Sol as guardian gods. It must be realized that the titles *Jovius* and *Herculius* do not mean identification with these gods.⁷ According to Rees, the titles strengthened the rule of the Tetrarchy. The Tetrarchs were seen as a mirror of the divine rule and they were destined to receive the divine blessing of the gods for their earthly rule.⁸ Mattingly argues that by this title, Diocletian was trying to gain an entrance with the Christians; does this cult not correspond to that of God the Father and God the Son?

Hercules was increasingly being adopted as a symbol of a good emperor. He was identified with the divine *virtus*, that worked through the imperial soul. Christianity, however, refuses to see Jupiter and Hercules as adequate expressions of God.⁹ Constantine was proclaimed the new Augustus in 306. Lactantius describes this moment as the most blissful day in the world. However, this day has a twofold picture: on the one hand, Constantine deliberately left the tetrarchic form of government and transgressed his own Rubicon. He put the whole area on the map because he had to reckon with three Tetrarchs, who threaten him with physical and military destruction.¹⁰ July 25, 306 was the decisive date, the Constantinian turning point. The breakthrough of Christianity as the dominant religion came only because Constantine survived his wrongful rule and because he was included in the Tetrarchy. Lactantius' idea that Constantine ended the persecution of Christians in 306 and gave Christians full recognition of their religion is incorrect. Constantine himself had no part in the edict of Galerius. In 310, Constantine even received a vision of Apollo.¹¹ In 307 Constantine took the name *Herculius*, following the tetrarchs, but his vision of Apollo in 310 renounced that title. Another aspect is that he considered himself as a follower of Sol Invictus, while he would be so intertwined in Christian affairs and at a time when he was allied with Licinius, before he turned against him.¹² The question, of course, is

⁷ Mattingly 1952, p. 131.

⁸ Rees 1993, p. 198.

⁹ Mattingly 1952, pp. 132-133.

¹⁰ Brandt 2007, p. 38.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

¹² Cameron 2005, p. 91.

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what Apollo “said”; he is said to have predicted a long and happy life for Constantine, but that does not explain his renunciation of the title *Herculius*. Praet does provide a possible explanation for this. In 307, Constantine married Fausta, Maximian’s daughter. In a panegyric in honour of the marriage, Constantine was praised for the youthful wisdom with which he was content with the title of the Caesar. An expression of the hope that Constantine will be allowed to continue the dynasty of the Herculiens for all eternity follows.¹³ The bond between Constantine and Maximian was not permanent. Maximian came into conflict with his son Maxentius and fled to Constantine's territory. However, the old Augustus twice tried to get Constantine out of the saddle. The two coups failed and after the second one, in 310, Constantine granted his father-in-law the right to commit suicide. The title *Herculius* now became a nuisance and disappeared from the coins.¹⁴

Dynasty

Cameron quotes Eusebius of Caesaria’s *Vita Constantini* in which Constantius is said to be a Christian because he surrounded himself with men of the church and because he named his children like Anastasia.¹⁵ This places very much the question, because it does not in itself say anything about personal religious awareness. According to Praet, Constantius was absolutely non-Christian. He easily placed himself in the religious ideology of Jovians and Herculiens and had a special devotion to the ancient sun god Sol Invictus or Helios-Apollo.¹⁶ In the beginning of the Panegyric the author tells how Constantius reached the end of the world during a campaign in the high north of England. There, where the days never end, Constantius was admitted to the assembly of the gods, and Jupiter himself asked him to appoint a successor to the throne. Constantine was thus chosen not only by his own father, but also by the father of all gods to be emperor of the Roman Empire. These claims are reinforced by placing Constantine as the third emperor in a fictional dynasty. Constantius was the son of Claudius II Gothicus (268-270). Claudius and his successor Aurelian have made the

¹³ Praet 1997, p. 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 141.

¹⁵ Cameron 2005, p. 91.

¹⁶ Praet 1997, p. 140.

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cult of Sol Invictus the most favoured cult and religious foundation. The Sol discourse of 310 seamlessly linked Constantine with political and dynastic considerations: the solar cult linked Constantine with two prestigious emperors who played a crucial role in restoring the unity of the empire.¹⁷ Constantine was not interested in his father's political ideology and revealed no loyalty to it. He strived for a monarchical position.¹⁸ His father, Constantius, belonged to the Tetrarchy as *Herculius* and Caesar since 293. The fact that Constantine had been familiar with the divine omnipresence and his somewhat monotheistic cult of Sol from childhood does not imply that Constantine was a Christian before or during 306, or adherent to an exclusive solar cult. This must be seen against the background of the religious-political developments in the last quarter of the third century and the fact that Constantine was sensitive to everything religious.¹⁹

Representation on coins, structures and statues

According to ancient historian Timothy Barnes, Constantine, born between 275 and 285, found his way to Christianity on an, relatively, early age and was in any case sympathetic to the Christians and the Christian church in 306. Jacob Burckhardt gives in *Die Zeit Constantins der Großen* a very different picture. Burckhardt suspects that Constantine did not pretend or behave as a Christian during his lifetime, but that he used all his physical strength and spiritual power to achieve his goal, which was to consolidate his emperorship.²⁰ Brandt agrees with his *Konstantin der Grosse*, in which he indicates that Constantine was the first Roman emperor to understand that he must accept monotheistic Christianity without losing or limiting his political leeway. Even as Christian, he retained the sovereignty to pursue a partly tolerant non-Christian policy in the service of the common good, but of course also because of his power-retaining policy.²¹ According to Palanque, Constantine reached Christianity in several steps and not all at once. Lactantius is cited here, which distinguishes three levels: the first level condemns false religions and repels unruly cults. The second level discovers that there

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁸ Brandt 2007, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 9-10.

²¹ Brandt 2006, p. 17.

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is only one supreme God and the third level reveals the servant sent to earth by God to reveal Him. A first conversion can be said to be the case when the relationship between Constantine and Maximian ended. Maximian was related to the Herculean ideology as well as Constantine. In 310 Constantine replaced this title with the official Sol Invictus dynasty.²² Straub argues, in my opinion incorrectly, that Constantine already converted to the Christian God when he wrote Anullius. But despite the new belief, its traditional frame of reference did not change.²³ Cameron states that Constantine continued to mint coins with the image of Sol. His refusal of sacrifices must be included in this matter. However, aren't these all due to his personal plan to consolidate and increase his power?²⁴

The next question is how Constantine viewed the new faith. Because there is often a talk of the "highest God", henotheistic tendencies can be discerned here. More important, this god is not named. This makes his supposed conversion even more unreliable.²⁵ Straub speaks again of the relationship between Constantine and Sol, portraying Constantine as an ardent follower, but according to Straub, Constantine made no secret that he started to believe in God since 312. This is very much the question, given his great love for Sol. According to Nicholson, it's about what Constantine thought he saw. According to Eusebius, Constantine was so astonished by the sign that he missed its meaning. Neither Eusebius nor Lactantius indicate that this vision made Constantine become a Christian.²⁶ Even after his vision of Apollo in 310, he had himself portrayed as *Sol Comes* (companion). Christians were also familiar with the image of *Sol Iustitiae*. Hermann Usener adds that an immovable mighty sun god is well known to Christians and that in this they came to see Christ as the saviour of the earth.²⁷ Constantine was seen by the gentiles as *Helios*, by the Christians as Christ, and thirdly as the glorious majesty of the Emperor. Christians were further criticized for

²² Palanque 1971, pp. 66-67.

²³ Straub 1967, p. 40.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 41.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 41.

²⁶ Nicholson 2000, pp. 311-312.

²⁷ Straub 1967, p. 43.

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worshipping Constantine as a god, but this is a false statement. Constantine's coins say enough: on the front he is depicted in a veil, but on the back, he is in a chariot pulled by four horses, with one arm outstretched upwards.²⁸ A hand reaches out from heaven to receive Constantine. The question is whether this is Jupiter or God;²⁹ another factor to consider is the fact that he continued to hold the title *pontifex maximus* and that he did not suddenly take away all the privileges of the non-Christian priests.³⁰ This gives enough food for thought. It is certain that he did not repent before his death, that he still spent too much time in non-Christian spheres for that. Before his "conversion" to Christianity, Constantine displayed only a vague religious sense. He initially continued in his public portrayal and propaganda, to use expressions and motifs that were not exclusively non-Christian, but did appeal to the polytheistic civilians. Until 323, Constantine's officials continued to mint coins dedicated to Sol Invictus.³¹ Constantine was still in need of the support of the ruling class. Preger argues that five years after the Council of Nicaea, Constantine had himself portrayed as *Helios*, because he himself was so little Christian. According to the author, the theory is still undisputed (1978).³² Furthermore, Dölger and Stähelin are quoted as agreeing that they found each other in the Constantine-*Helios* image in Constantinople and that *Helios*' identification with Constantine is a fact.³³ This theory, which says that Constantine wanted to be deified and identified with *Helios* in 330, is in strong contrast to the theory that Constantine adopted Christianity. However, according to the author, it is certain that from 320 onwards, Constantine distanced himself more and more from all non-Christian issues.³⁴ The question is whether this is true given his currency policy. Karayannopoulos provides various evidence. For example, he speaks of charters and letters. Furthermore, the predicate *invictus* was replaced by "victor", and the title *divus* was not used for its

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 47.

³¹ Sarris 2002, pp. 21-22.

³² Karayannopoulos 1978, pp. 485-486.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 487.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 488.

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name. The genius of the emperor is also no longer depicted on coins, namely Sol (322).³⁵ Furthermore, Christianity would now have much more influence on Constantine's policies. From 324 onwards, Constantine's politics are portrayed as politically inspired by Christianity. However, Constantine did allow the construction of the temple for the *gens Flavia*, bearing in mind that no superstition should be professed.³⁶ The church buildings founded by Constantine also speak a clear language. This includes the Latheran basilica built in 313. In 315 the famous Arch of Constantine was inaugurated. There are no Christian elements depicted in this iconography, contrary to Victoria, Sol and other deities. Constantine was a highly motivated power politics pragmatist and realist, well known in the field of religious politics.³⁷

The Arch of Constantine was formally dedicated by order of the people and the Senate. The inscription is characterized as the "Masterpiece of Obscurity": *For the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus, the greatest pious and fortunate Augustus, the Senate and the people of Rome, while inspired by a deity with the greatness of his spirit and at the same time, the state, as well as tyranny, as well as the collective supporters, has avenged it with just weapons, consecrating this excellent bow by triumph.*³⁸ This inscription does not seem so obscure at all when placed against the background of henotheism. Some gods were then placed higher in the divine hierarchy. God is just one of them. Constantine was known more as "Emperor Constantine" in the period 312-324 than as the "Christian Constantine". Its main goal was the acquisition of supremacy. To achieve this, he would have first to take out Licinius. For this, he needed the support of the mainly non-Christian soldiers. Also, in 320, Constantine was addressed by his officers with the words: "Augustus Constantine, may the gods keep you".³⁹ Constantine's domestic politics, law, and religion in the years 312-324 referred to the emperor as a rationally acting politician, continuing in many ways the reform policies

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 489-490.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 491-492.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 14.

³⁸ Brandt 2006, p. 60.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

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of the highly non-Christian Diocletian.⁴⁰ Constantine had long left the image of the confession to Christianity.⁴¹ As for the coinage, Sol still appears as *Comes*, companion, and protector of Constantine until the year 325. Christian symbols are completely absent. The last monarchical phase of Constantine's rule begun with the elimination of Licinius in 324 and ended with his own death in 337. Since September 324, Constantine as sole ruler exercised a dynastic monarchical traditional example, in which his sons acted as subordinate co-rulers in the rank of Caesar. Almost at the same time, Constantine experienced its peak with regard to his church politics, the Ecumenical Council of 325.⁴² Of course, the view on Constantinople cannot be based on a fundamental, sudden opposition between Christians and non-Christians. Constantine renounced blood sacrifices, the hecatombs of Jupiter and the extensive sacrifice of a hundred oxen. On the other hand, he preserved *Victoria* as well as the cult of Sol Invictus, so beloved by him, which referred in many ways to the light Christology with many sun components. After his death he was recognized and worshiped not only as an apostle but also as Christ like (*isochristos*). The Christian ruler appointed by God came from a later tradition that liberates the emperor from all fractures and inconsistencies.⁴³

According to Ramage and Ramage, Constantine expressed his own importance from often colossal images. As the first emperor, he also had sculptures removed from the monuments of his predecessors and placed on his own monuments. Thus, he hoped to let something like this radiate upon himself from the glory of his own predecessors.⁴⁴ According to Ramage, nothing more spectacularly illustrates the importance that Constantine placed on visual propaganda than the remains of his colossal statue, which had stood in the apse of his basilica on the *Forum Romanum*. The height of over nine meters and the high head is unparalleled in terms of effect. The giant eyes are turned upwards, accentuated by the deeply drilled bean-shaped pupils. For the first time since Hadrian, the emperor no longer wears a beard. This gives his powerful jaws even more

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 16

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Ramage en Ramage 1999, p. 282.

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emphasis. The image is related to non-Christian cult images, which often were also very large and showed the same distant expression. The image must have completely dominated the basilica.⁴⁵ Jonathan Kirsch quotes Eusebius, who said that Constantine should remove all idols in non-Christian temples from the empire. They should have been stripped of their gold, silver, and sheaths, so that the wooden structures and scattering fills became visible and the non-Christians were confronted with the fact that their idols were not gods at all. However, this had nothing to do with Christianity, but with the funding for his new city. Even non-Christian emperors would melt down metal statues to pay for armies and palaces. Even the gigantic statue of Constantine, made of cast bronze and placed on a stone column, is free from Christian iconography. He is depicted as a non-Christian god –the head is adorned with a halo attribute of Sol Invictus and the right hand carries Victoria.⁴⁶ The statue itself is Apollo from the site of ancient Troy, whose face has been reworked into that of Constantine. The detailed whole is intended to gain the faithfulness of both Christians and Gentiles.⁴⁷ Rudolf Leeb elaborates on the Sol symbolism even further. He says that this symbolism had long been very important to Constantine, but that it is not certain how long Constantine used this symbolism.⁴⁸ At the foundation of Constantinople, a gigantic porphyry column with a statue of Constantine was erected in the center of the *Forum Constantini*. Sixth-century historians gave extensive account about this. Constantine was, among other things, compared with the sun by Hesychius Ilustrios. John Malalas speaks of seven rays. According to the fifth-century church historians, the statue was honoured by the population.⁴⁹ Leeb also speaks of a fifty-centimeter-high statue that at first resembles Sol, but is more likely Constantine, because the hairstyle refers to the rules introduced by Constantine.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 291.

⁴⁶ Kirsch 2005, p. 184.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 185.

⁴⁸ Leeb 1992, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.12-13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 17.

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Conclusion

As far as I am concerned, it has been sufficiently argued that Constantine had an imperial cult that can be placed in the tradition of the earlier emperors. His new encounter with Christianity says nothing about a new religious experience. Constantine, he was not only placed in a Sol dynasty, but he also continued to depict Sol on coins following his predecessors. Constantine still acted from the traditional tolerant Roman ideas, in which ritual dynamics were palpable. He did not believe in God, but regarded him as a strong divine presence that could stand by him, just as other strangers gods could, but it says nothing about conversion, but more about the confirmation of henotheistic thoughts. Moreover, a real conversion implies renouncing the old faith, but this is not the case with Constantine. This notion played no role at all at the time. He even wanted to portray himself as Sol and be deified. The many statues bear witness to this. In short, Constantine the Great was a member of a dynasty familiar with the Tetrarchic ideology of Jovians and Herculians and the alleged Sol dynasty. In this, he placed himself effortlessly and saw his encounter with God as a means to reinforce his power politics. Sol and Christ merged together into a kind of Solar Christ, which meant that there was no real religious break. Syncretism and henotheism flourished at that time as never before.

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THE SCENE OF ORPHEUS TAMING WILD ANIMALS

ORPHEUS AND THE CENTAUR CHIRON

VANYA LOZANOVA-STANCHEVA¹

Abstract

A series of remarkable images on mosaics from sepulchral buildings or ritual halls, textile works of art within a Christian context, as well as *pyxides*, introduce strange and unusual mythological figures into the widespread theme of Orpheus *taming* wild animals. A special place in the pictorial composition is occupied by the figure of a centaur, who seems to have had complex functions indicating the space of the events.

This paper aims to systematise the source base, to analyse “the narrative,” and to offer new details to the interpretation of the remarkable and enigmatic scene, which –in combination with the fragmented poetic evidence– allows the reconstruction of a possible mythological precedent for the journey of Orpheus to the World Beyond, where he attained the mystic theological knowledge and that allowed him to lay the foundations of the mystical initiations. Those eschatological notions were projected in some early Christian or Christian gnostic communities in the period between the 2nd and the mid-6th century, as indicated by sacral and funerary monuments.

Keywords: *Orpheus, Chiron, centaurus, the World Beyond, the scene of Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*

A series of remarkable images on mosaics from sepulchral buildings or ritual halls, textile works of art (originating predominantly from Egypt) –possibly from *medallions* decorating funerary textiles, as well as *pyxides*, introduce strange and unusual mythological figures into the widespread theme of *Orpheus taming wild*

¹ Vanya Lozanova-Stancheva, Prof. D.Sc., PhD is a Professor at the Institute for Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia (Bulgaria). Her research interests are focused on the history and theory of Ancient culture; Ancient culture and religion. Academia.edu: <https://bas.academia.edu/VanyaLozanova>. E-mail: lozanova_vanya@yahoo.com.

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animals, e.g., centaurs, Pan, and satyrs marking the Dionysian mythological circle and a Dionysian religious *connotation*. Thus, a centaur and Pan with a *syrinx* are seen in the lowermost row of the composition of the floor mosaic from Jerusalem,² found in a building identified as a Christian tomb.

Figure 1

[A textile from Egypt]. Collection of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. Washington, DC.
<https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/catalogue/BZ.1972.4>

The parallels of that image in several works of textile art³ testify that we are not faced with a local exception in the interpretation of the theme. Some of these works are:

1. A textile from Egypt in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks;⁴
2. An Egyptian textile in Moscow (private collection), later – in the Pushkin Museum, now – with unknown provenance: Pan in the upper right-hand quadrant, looking inward and holding a *syrinx* in his hand;
3. An Egyptian textile at Victoria and Albert Museum, London, originating from a cemetery at Akhmim, Egypt; the figure of Pan with a *syrinx* in his hand is placed between Orpheus and the right-hand frame of the artefact;

² Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, p. 139–171, Pl. 4; LIMC 7.2: Orpheus 171; see Bliss 1901; currently in Turkey.

³ Madigan 1992, pp.405–416; the parallels were proposed for the first time by Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, pp.139–171.

⁴ Madigan 1992, p. 405–416, Plate 1.

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4. An Egyptian textile in New York (private collection): Orpheus among the animals, flanked by a pair of satyrs.⁵

To the artefacts described, it is possible to add a fragmentary relief pediment from the Egyptian town of Malawi, which is assumed to have originated from a tomb structure that preserves not Orpheus but his lyre, a selection of animals and a Pan.



Figure 2

Orpheus Taming Wild Animals [ivory pyxis]. Monastery of St. Columbano at Bobbio.

http://www.tuttopiaccenza.net/notizie_utili_e_approfondimenti/alta_val_trebbia/museo_dell'E2%80%99abbazia_di_san_columbano_sc_3291.htm

The elaborate composition of the ivory pyxis from the monastery of St. Columbano at Bobbio, published by Joseph Natanson,⁶ is complemented by the figures of a centaur and Pan among the animals, whereas the *pyxis* from the Abbey of St. Julien à Broude, today in the Bargello Museum in Florence,⁷ is decorated with two centaurs accompanied by a pair of Sileni. Both artefacts are dated to the 5th–6th century and their origin is attributed to Alexandria.⁸

The Funerary Context

Many researchers believe erroneously that centaurs had no

funerary associations,⁹ that they were not among the usual monsters of the Underworld,¹⁰

⁵ Walters Art Gallery 1947, No. 806.

⁶ Natanson 1953; Volbach 1976, p. 70, No. 91.

⁷ Graeven 1899.

⁸ Friedman 1967, pp. 1–13.

⁹ Friedman 1970, p. 223.

¹⁰ Austin 1986, pp. 121–122; Adkin 2006, pp. 173–175.

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and that they were not linked to figures in the Dionysian circle as, for example, Pan. However, mythology is well familiar with the twelve demons, Lamian Centaurs or Lamian Pheres, which Zeus placed as guards of the child Dionysus against the scheming of the jealous Hera. Her revenge was to transform them into ox-horned centaurs. They accompanied Dionysus in his Indian campaign. During the Antiquity, centaurs were often depicted in the deity's *thiasos*, sometimes even pulling his chariot.¹¹ According to some ancient authors, Dionysus himself was entrusted to be brought up and educated by the wise centaur Chiron,¹² considered by Homer (*Il.* 11.832) to be “the wisest and justest of all the centaurs.”

The Dionysian context was not alien to Orphism and its mythology. Orpheus is credited with the Orphic reform in the Dionysian cult. The mythological versions are inconsistent in revealing their relations. Ancient poetry places centaurs as guards along the road to the Underworld, together with Scylla, Hydra, Chimaera, Gorgons and Harpies.¹³

In the famous scene at the entrance to the Underworld, Virgil¹⁴ included the centaurs first among the monsters guarding it:

*Multa que praetere avariarum monstra ferarum
Centauri inforibus stabulant, Scyllae quebi formes,
et centum geminus Briareus, ac belua Lerna
horrendum stridens, flammis que armata Chimaera,
Gorgones Harpyiae que et formati corporis umbrae.*

Many researchers assume that Virgil was influenced in his notions by *De Rerum Natura* (4.732) of Lucretius (99–55BC), where centaurs ranked first, ahead of Scylla and Cerberus, among the monsters welcoming the dead.

¹¹ Nonn, *Dionys*, 14. 143 ff. 247 ff.

¹² Ptolem, Hephæstionis. *Nova Historia*, 4.

¹³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 286–287; Statius, *Thebaid*, 4. 536 ff.; Statius, *Silvae*, 5.3. 260 ff.; Silius Italic, 13, 587–590.

¹⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6, 282–290.

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The figures of the centaur and Pan/Sileni are marked by a liminal status and unambiguously identify the split between the two natures: human and inhuman, civilised space and wild Nature, emphasized by the mountains covered with forests and caves. Both figures combine wild and animal characteristics with lust, lawlessness and lack of moderation (for example in wine drinking and sex).¹⁵ Even in Homer (*Il.* 1.268; 2.742; see *Odyssey.* 21.300) centaurs are “wild creatures” (*Φῆρες*) inhabiting Mount Pelion. Strabo also calls them “wild creatures” (Strabo. 9.5.19), and according to a fragment by Theognis, centaurs even ate raw meat (Theogn. Frg. 541)! When Heracles sought the Erymanthian Boar for his fourth labour, he reached the cave of the wise centaur Pholus, who invited him and offered him food. The centaur prepared roast meat for his guest and placed raw meat for himself on the table (Schol. Theocrit. *Idyll.* 7. 149). The descriptions by the ancient authors of the episode with the upbringing of the young Achilles by Chiron vary only



Fig 3

[Dish with Orpheus among the animals]. Römisch-Germanisches Museum. Köln

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dish_with_Orpheus_among_the_animals,_Romisch-Germanisches_Museum,_Cologne_\(8119434657\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dish_with_Orpheus_among_the_animals,_Romisch-Germanisches_Museum,_Cologne_(8119434657).jpg)

concerning the raw food with which the centaur fed him: according to Apollodorus (3.13.6) –on the inwards of lions and the marrows of boars and bears; according to the scholion to Homer’s *Iliad* (15. 37) on the marrows of lions and bears; and according to Statius (*Achill.* 2.99 ff.)– on lion’s flesh and she-wolf’s marrow.¹⁶ Such characteristics burden the centaur’s mythological figure with a marginal and liminal nature, marking the borders between the two worlds: human and beyond human.

¹⁵ Diod., Sic., 4. 69. 4; Apoll., El. 21; Ovid., *Met.* 12.210.

¹⁶ Robertson 1940, pp. 177–180.

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Consequently, the centaur's image in combination with Pan/Silenus in the scene of Orpheus with the wild animals builds harmoniously not only the Dionysian context; it also adds funerary aspects to the analysed composition. The appearance of these images in the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* does not contradict in the least, but –conversely– confirms the hypothesis about reflection from a sacral transient *topos* at the border with the World Beyond, which would explain the artist's choice to depict them in funerary buildings and ritual spaces.

Fantastic Mythological Figures

The analyses omit the circumstance that in addition to Dionysian figures, the varying compositions of the theme among the animals are intertwined with other mythological creatures indicating the World Beyond and its deforming discourse. First and foremost, the appearance of a *griffin* in the top right-hand corner of the mosaic from Shahba, Syria (FK117) is very impressive.

The *griffin* is also presented in the elaborate composition of animals and mythological figures in relief on the inner side of a dish with the scene of Orpheus among the animals (Köln, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Inv. No. 166), dated to the 3rd century BCE and found in a funerary context. It is placed on the second row from top to bottom, looking outward and with back turned to the elephant following him, while a centaur playing a double *aulos* is depicted on the next, third line.

The presence of a bird like a peacock, charged with paradisiac connotations, is much more frequently depicted in the scene: again, in the mosaic from Shahba, Syria, the peacock is depicted symmetrically to the *griffin*, immediately above the head of Orpheus, on the left. A similar polyvalent motif can be seen in the mosaic of the Villa with the *Orpheus Mosaic* in Leptis Magna (National Museum, Tripoli), where the peacock is



Fig.4
Blanzly-lès-Fismes [mosaic]. Musée d'art et d'archéologie du Pays de Laon, France,
(first half of the 4th century, found in 1858).
<http://www.genealexis.fr/cartes-postales/blanzly.php>

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depicted on the right, above the singer's head; the mosaic from the Woodchester Roman Villa (Gloucestershire, England), where the peacock appears on the left, immediately next to the figure of Orpheus; the mosaic from the ancient Roman city of Volubilis, Morocco. The image of the peacock on the mosaic from Blanzky-lès-Fismes (at the Musée d'art et d'archéologie du Pays de Laon, France), on the left, above the singer's head, is extremely impressive.¹⁷ It occupies an important place also on the top row, to the right of Orpheus, on the inner relief of the dish with Orpheus among the animals, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Köln. The examples can be multiplied.

The peacock was a significant figure in the images presenting the Source of Life in the World Beyond. These compositions often include many animals amidst landscapes and floral motifs, especially vine twigs, which can be seen in several floor mosaics, e.g., the fragments of floor mosaics from Syria (Emessa?), today at the J. Paul Getty Museum (donated in 1975). Vine twigs usually frame peacocks positioned frontally on both sides of a *kantharos* as a symbol of the Source of Life. Those images became subsequently prominent in early Church visual art. In early Christian art and literature peacocks were considered to be the most delightful creatures on Earth and St. Augustine mentions the conviction that their flesh is incorruptible (Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 21.4). The peacock, which is very often integrated in the thematic composition of Orpheus among the animals, also indicates the World Beyond and is closely associated with the notion of Paradise on Earth and the Gardens of Eden at the end of the world. From the 6th century onwards, the peacock became a stable Christian symbol of immortality, associated with Paradise and the Way Beyond, which also imposed it as an important decorative element in sepulchral constructions, on sarcophagi and floor mosaics.¹⁸

The Literary Narrative

The narrative introducing the mythological motif of the Nature-enchanting power of Orpheus' music and song is extremely scarce and severely fragmented. More often, it is taken out of its context, to propose additional associative interpretations to the principal

¹⁷ Stern 1955, pp.41–77.

¹⁸ Maguire 1987, pp. 39–40.

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theme; such are the allusions in Old-Attic tragedy and poetry.¹⁹ Visualisation in pictorial art seems to precede the appearance of the theme in verbal art. However, a concrete literary narrative can be reconstructed, thus verbalising and rendering concrete the relation of the pictorial theme with Orpheus and the Nature enchanted by him, on the one hand, and the figure of the centaur in the group of works of art outlined above –on the other.

One of the earliest poetic pieces of evidence –frg. 62 by Simonides of Ceos (second half of the 6th century, first half of the 5th century BCE)– indisputably places the analysed motif in the context of the mysterious journey of the Argonauts:

*Above his [Orpheus'] head innumerable birds flitted, and fish leapt
straight out of the dark blue water at his beautiful song.²⁰*

A similar motif also appears in the *Argonautica* (l. 572–574) of Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BCE); the son of Oeagrus played a well-composed song on his lyre, and fishes darted above the deep sea:

*τοὶ δὲ βαθεῖης ἰχθύες αἰσσοντες ὑπερῶ' ἄλός, ἄμμιγα παύροις ἄπλετοι, ὕγρὰ κέλευθα
διασκαίροντες ἔποντο.*

The earliest image of Orpheus on the metope from Delphi known to us, dated to the 7th century BCE,²¹ also presents him in the context of the journey of the Argonauts. This motif is developed in its most detailed, albeit latest variant in the so-called *Ὀρφείως Ἀργοναυτικά* (Orphic Argonautica), an epic poem of 1.376 verses in hexameter, dated not earlier than the 4th–5th and even 6th century. The narrative is in the first person singular, on behalf of Orpheus. After the early Christian writer Tatian (ca. 120–173 CE),²² many researchers are inclined to consider Onomacritus (ca. 530–480 BCE) as the author of the

¹⁹ Aesch. *Ag.* 1629–1631; Eurip. *Iph. Aul.* 1211–1214; Eurip. *Bacch.* 560–564.

²⁰ Simonides, fragment 62 (PMG, 567), Orph. 943 Bernabé: Available at [https://livingpoets.dur.ac.uk/w/Simonides_fragment_62_\(PMG_567_Page\)](https://livingpoets.dur.ac.uk/w/Simonides_fragment_62_(PMG_567_Page)) [Last access 7 February 2021. The page is no longer available].

²¹ Szeliga 1986, pp. 297–305.

²² Tatian. *Adv. Graecos.* 1. 41; King 1867, pp. 6–7.

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poem, who –according to him – created all works disseminated under the name of Orpheus.²³ That opinion was followed both by several ancient authors and by modern researchers. Some of them are more cautious, assuming that the authorship of the poem belonged to some unknown author, not later than Onomacritus. However, the analysis of the verses and their structure allows their dating to many later times, not preceding at least the era of Apollonius Rhodius.²⁴ Writing during the Late Antiquity, the author under the name of “Orpheus” was in a position to integrate or at least to know the entire tradition preceding him, following to a great extent the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BCE). However, the *Orphic Argonautica* differs both in very important details and in the simplicity of the narrative, compared to that of Apollonius.

According to the *Orphic Argonautica*, when Jason started recruiting his crew of kings and heroes, he first sought Orpheus in Pieria, at the highest peaks of Leibethra, while he skilfully played his guitar and sang sweet songs in his cave:

he found me (Orpheus – author’s note, V.L.-S.) *occupied playing my cithara skilfully and singing sweet songs, stroking wild animals and winged serpents* (71–73).²⁵

This vision unambiguously identifies the conquering power of Orpheus’ music and song over the wild animals. Jason convinced the Thracian to join the Argonauts, because only he could guide them in the sea, i.e., as a guide, and also a priest,²⁶ and the other heroes did not wish to set off without him.²⁷ And not only that! Here, the anonymous poet has introduced a clear hint at an earlier *catabasis* or journey to the world of the dead from which the singer from *horse-breeding Thrace* managed to return. Jason’s choice to look

²³ Kinkel 1877, fr. 8, p. 241.

²⁴ Bode 1825, pp. 388–397.

²⁵ Ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ συνάγειρεν ἀγακλειτοῦς βασιλῆας, θρήικην εἰς εὐπωλον ἐπέιγετο δῖος Ἰήσων, καί μ’ ἔκιχεν κιθάρην πολυδαίδαλον ἐντύνοντα, ὄφρα κέσοι μέλπων προχέω μελίγηρυν ἀοιδὴν, κηλήσω δέ τεθῆρας ἰδ’ ἐρπετὰ καὶ πετεηνά. Gesner 1764, p. 20.

²⁶ [...] Οὐ γὰρ δὴ πλῶσαι πρὸς βάρβαρα φῦλα μέδονται, νόσφισ ἔθεν· καὶ γὰρ ῥα ποτιζ ὄφον ἠερόεντα, νεῖα τον εἰς κευθμῶνα, λιτῆς εἰς πυθμένα γαίης, μὸν ὄν ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπων πελάσαι καὶ νόστον ἀνευρεῖν· ὧν ἔνεκεν ξυνήν τε δύνη Μινύαισιν ἀρέσθαι, καὶ κλέος ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπ’ ἔσσομένο ἰσιπυθέσθαι. Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 186–187.

²⁷ OA 77–95.

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for him first, before the other heroes, was because he was the only one among the mortals who dared to travel to the dark fog, down into the depths of Hades, and the only mortal who found the way back.²⁸

According to Herodorus of Heraclea Pontica,²⁹ who compiled an *Argonautica* around 400 BCE, and Apollonius Rhodius (*Arg.* 1. 33), it was precisely the centaur Chiron who advised Jason to take Orpheus with him, because only the Thracian singer was capable of guiding the ship *Argo* safely past the Sirens as incarnation of death³⁰ and marking the transition Beyond. The sound of their murderous voices was to be drowned by the music of Orpheus' lyre and song. Chiron was a soothsayer even in Pindar's poetry.³¹ He was not only endowed with prophetic skills, but he passed them to his disciples as well.³² Herodorus unambiguously referred to Chiron as *μάντις* (oracle):

*Ἡρόδωρος δύο εἶναι Ὀρφεῖς φησιν· ὧν τὸν ἕτερον συμπεπλευκέναι τοῖς
Ἀργοναύταις. Ζητεῖται δὲ διὰ τὴν Ὀρφεύς ἀσθενῆς ὧν συνέπλει τοῖς ἥρωσιν· ὅτι
μάντις ὧν ὁ Χείρων ἔχρησε μὴ δύνασθαι τὰς Σειρήνας παρελθεῖν αὐτοῦς
Ὀρφέως μὴ συμπλέοντος. Οὕτως Ἡρόδωρος.*

Apollonius also ranks Orpheus first (1.23) in the so-called Catalogue of Argonauts (1. 23–233). According to him, he was the son of Calliope and the Thracian Oeagrus, born near the Pimpleian Height. That was Orpheus then, invited by Jason to take part in his endeavour, on the advice of the wise centaur Chiron (1. 33). Orpheus was the ruler of Bistonian Pieria, whereas in *Orphic Argonautica* of the Cicones in cattle-rich Bistonia, or –more generally– in Thracia (1. 23–34): *Men say that he by the music of his songs charmed the stubborn rocks upon the mountains and the course of rivers. And the wild oak-trees to this day, tokens of that magic strain, that grow at Zone on the Thracian shore, stand in ordered ranks close together, the same which under the charm of his lyre he led down from*

²⁸ *Ibid* 90–95.

²⁹ 31 F, 43 J; see Schol. Apoll. Rhod. 1. 31; FGtH 2 Müller Fr. 39, p. 38.

³⁰ Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 4. 891–919.

³¹ Pindar. *Pyth. Odes* 9.59–65.

³² Apollon. Rhod., *Arg.* 2.508–512.

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*Pieria. Such then was Orpheus whom Aeson's son welcomed to share his toils, in obedience to the behest of Cheiron, Orpheus ruler of Bistonian Pieria.*³³ In late authors like Pomponius Mela³⁴ and Nicander³⁵ the scene is reduced to a profane pastoral situation, placed in an ostensibly real geographic landscape, near the city Zone on the Thracian coast, probably under the influence of Apollonius Rhodius (1. 23–34).³⁶

We probably owe that desacralisation to the early mythographers, who made their geographic localisation relevant to the location of the cave of the centaur Chiron. The ship of the Argonauts first passed by it before setting off on its long and dangerous journey (see below §4. *In the Cave of the Centaur Chiron*).

Jason's motive to choose Orpheus first as his travel companion in his journey for the Golden Fleece appears to stem from a mythological precedent attributing both magic capacities and experience in the journey far Beyond to the Thracian musician. One of Orpheus's functions on the ship *Argo*, in addition to his magic ability to pacify the sea waves, the forces of Nature and the Sirens with his music (there are many references to the magic power of his singing and music during the campaign!) was his priestly role and the performing of rites for the participants in the journey. He was primarily connected with the sacred acts of the heroes, the communication with the divine and the restoring of order.³⁷ He made decisions on the place, time and nature of the rites to be performed by the Argonauts to secure the safety of their perilous journey. These functions can be reconstructed with particular clarity in *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius. The combination of sacrificial offering (402–449), ritual feast (450–459) and Orpheus' song (496–515), where the singer's priestly figure is indisputably presented as central and

³³ Apollon. Rhod. 1. 26–31.

³⁴ Pomp. Mela 2. 2. 16–33.

³⁵ Nicandr. *Ther.* 458–482.

³⁶ *πρῶτά νυν Ὀρφεὺς μνησώμεθα, τὸν ῥά ποτ' αὐτῆ, Καλλιόπη Θρηϊκὶ φατίζεται εὐνηθεῖσα, Οἱ ἀγρωσκοπιῆς Πιμπληίδος ἄγχι τεκέσθαι, αὐτὰρ τὸν γ' ἐπέουσιν ἀτειρέας οὖρεσι πέτρας, θέλξει ἀοιδῶν ἐνοπιῆ ποταμῶν τε ῥέεθρα. φηγοῖδ' ἀγριάδες, κείνης ἔτι σήματα μολπῆς, ἀκτῆς Θρηϊκῆς Ζώνης ἔπι τηλεθόσσαι, ἐξείης στιχόωσιν ἐπήτριμοι, ἃς ὄγ' ἐπι πρὸ, θελγομένας φόρμιγγι κατήγαγε Πιερίηθεν. Ὀρφέα μὲν δὴ τοῖον ἔδῶν ἐπαρωγὸν ἀέθλων, Αἰσονίδης Χείρωνος ἐφημοσύνη σπιθήσας δέξατο, Πιερίη Βιστωνίδι κοιρανέοντα.*

³⁷ Apollon. Rhod. 1. 492–515; see Busch 1993, pp. 305–318; Karanika 2010, p. 395 with literature.

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decisive for overcoming critical moments and for restoring the unity (*ὁμόνοια*), are of key importance for the successful start of the Argonauts' journey. The episode in which Orpheus initiates the Samothracian mysteries on the Island of *Samothrace* (1.915–921), which was needed for the safe continuation of the journey, is remarkable, albeit laconically. Diodorus Siculus (4. 43. 1) ads that when a violent storm caught up with the Argonauts and all lost hope of salvation, Orpheus – who was the only one onboard the ship who had been initiated in the Mysteries of the Samothracian gods – addressed a prayer to them for the saving of the heroes.

In Phrygia, Orpheus instructed the Argonauts how to dance fully armed, hitting their shields with their swords, during the sacrificial offering to Rhea to pacify her after they had killed King Cyzicus by mistake (1. 1132–1141).

Under the influence of the ritual acts described in detail, *the gracious god dessinclined her heart to pious sacrifices; and favourable signs appeared. The trees shed abundant fruit, and round their feet the earth of its own accord put forth flowers from the tender grass. And the beasts of the wild wood left their lairs and thicket sand came up fawning on them with their tails. And she caused yet another marvel; for hither to there was no flow of water on Dindymum, but then forthem an unceasing stream gushed forth from the thirsty peak just as it was, and the dwellers around in after times called that stream, the spring of Jason.*³⁸ The magic landscape could betray a reflection of the mythological motif of the power of Orpheus' music and song.

The singer from *horse-breeding Thrace* revealed to the Argonauts the meaning of Apollo's majestic epiphany on the desert island of Thynias (2. 683–693), advising them to dedicate it to the deity, to build him an altar on the shore and to pacify him with the steam of sacrifice and libations, so that he would secure their safe return. Again, for a safe return, Orpheus instructed the Argonauts to dedicate Apollo's tripod to the local deities (4. 1547–1555). That stable thematic line in *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius outlines the mystic silhouette of a powerful mediator between the heroes in the journey of the ship *Argo*, on the one hand, and the world of gods and demons –on the other.

³⁸ Transl. by R. C. Seaton 1967.

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Orpheus' decisive participation in Medea's magic rituals with which she lulled to sleep the dragon and the queen of the Underworld in order to give a chance to Jason to take the Golden Fleece is even more impressive.³⁹

The ritual character of the journey of the Argonauts is well outlined and emphasised, which made the presence of the figure of the priest-mystagogue and *μάντις* (soothsayer) Orpheus extremely important for the safe journey far to the East, to the palaces of the Sun's son, because the journey of the Argonauts essentially encodes the idea of the journey to the World Beyond, beyond the world of mortals. "The presence of Orpheus on the ship *Argo* represents an alternative epic variant that seems extremely important and decisively original compared to the standard concept of the heroic figures of the epic poets."⁴⁰ Researchers note the alternative nature of the figure of Orpheus, who was the only one to be the son of the mortal Oeagrus, the other heroes being sons of gods. Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode characterises them specifically as *ἡμιθέοι* (demigods: verses 184, 211, cf. 12).

Already back in the early 20th century, Marike Van der Kolf (1923) proposed the hypothesis of the ritual character of the journey of the Argonauts Beyond, based on the analysis of Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode (vv. 157–165), composed ca. 466/65 BCE to celebrate the chariot victory at Delphi of Arcesilas IV of Cyrene. That poetic work is Pindar's longest poem that integrates many earlier versions from Homer (vv. 41 onwards), which had been either totally lost or have been preserved in scarce fragments. It introduces a motif not known from earlier authors about the journey of the Argonauts to the land of Aetes, son of Helios, argued with the prophetic dream of Pelias. In his dream, the ghost of Phrixus asked him to go to the palaces of Aetes, and to bring home his spirit and the Golden Fleece. In order to understand the message of the dream, Pelias sent envoys to ask the Oracle of Delphi whether the quest was worth undertaking and the immediate reply that he received was to send a ship for the sacred mission as soon as possible. Due to his advanced age, he asked Jason to make the heroic quest instead of him. The analysis of that

³⁹ Nock 1926, pp. 50–51.

⁴⁰ Christopoulos 1991, pp. 205–222.

⁴¹ Homer. *Odys.* 12. 69–72.

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motif additionally allowed associating the journey of the Argonauts with a journey Beyond,⁴² in which the return of the spirit of the deceased person was of basic importance, whereas the oracle merely unlocked and set in motion the long chain of events. However, and although the journey resembled ostensibly the *catabasis* of Orpheus in the kingdom of Hades to take Eurydice out of the kingdom of the dead, it occurred in a horizontal plan, far in the East, in the land of (the son) of the Sun (Aeetes)!

Regions burdened with the characteristics of “otherness” and the World Beyond, marked by monsters and figures outside the civilised world, were introduced in the basic structure of the preserved variants of *Argonautica*.⁴³ The hybrid figure of the centaur, marked by the deforming discourse of that “otherness”, has clear marker functions at the border with the World Beyond.

In the Cave of the Centaur Chiron

At the very beginning of the journey of the Argonauts, according to *Orphic Argonautica*, Orpheus performed the necessary libations, rituals and prayers, appealing to the sea deities.⁴⁴

The first stop of the ship *Argo*, according to the poem, was at the foothills of the windy Mount Pelion, overgrown with trees, from where the cave of Chiron, “the wisest and justest of all the centaurs”,⁴⁵ was seen as a small black spot, Peleus sent to him his son Achilles to study the chords of the harp⁴⁶ and to receive a sensible and good upbringing. He proposed to stop and

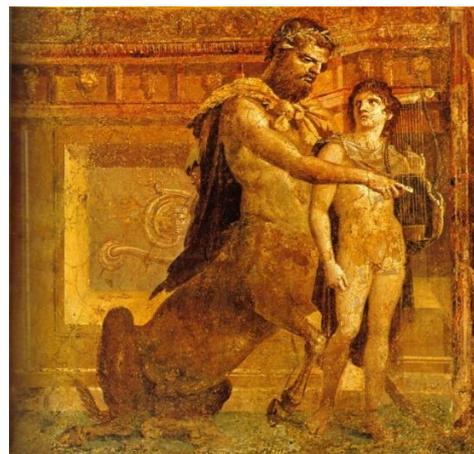


Fig. 5.

The Centaur Chiron instructs Achilles, [fresco from Herculaneum, 1st century AD]. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiron>

⁴² Farnell 1930, I, p.148; Fehr 1936, p. 85; Burton 1962, p. 160.

⁴³ Krevans2000, pp. 69–84; Hunter 1989, pp. 10–12; Karanika 2010, pp. 391–410; Sistakou 2008, pp. 311–340; Stephens 2008, pp. 96–97, and others.

⁴⁴ *OA* 333–352; *Kyriakidis*2007.

⁴⁵ Hom. *Il.* 11.832.

⁴⁶ Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 1.407–409.

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see his boy. After the guests were welcomed and feasted by the host in his cave, some of the Argonauts insisted on a musical contest with the lyre between the centaur and Orpheus. Orpheus refused initially out of respect for Chiron's seniority, but the Centaur convinced him to accept the challenge.⁴⁷ The host took the beautiful lyre from the hands of Achilles and started to sing first about the conflict between Centaurs and Lapiths, and about Heracles who interfered in that conflict. Orpheus chose to sing a hymn about the creation of the world and the birth of the gods –from Chaos to Uranus, Brimo, Bacchus and the Giants, resorting indisputably to potential Orphic doctrinal sources.⁴⁸

This is again an interpolation of the motif of the animals and Nature enchanted by the miraculous power of Orpheus' music.⁴⁹ In the depth of Chiron's cave the very rocks reflected the song and started ringing: the wild animals sat listening around the cave and the birds had lowered their wings as if they were tired and had forgotten their nests. That story is absent in *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius, where Chiron merely stepped down on the coast from the Pelion Heights with his wife to show to Peleus his young son Achilles and to wave to the Argonauts, wishing them a safe journey home,⁵⁰ and to mark the starting point of the dangerous journey of the Argonauts. This can be perceived as a mythological precedent echoing an earlier campaign of the Argonauts and secondary artistic interpolation that reinterpreted and gave a secondary explication in a broader plan of the motif *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* as a peculiar vision on the perspective of the journey of the Argonauts Beyond.

The myth about the journey of the Argonauts evoked interest in the Roman world long before the late Roman Republic.⁵¹ It came alive both in vase painting⁵² and in early Latin drama:⁵³ two tragedies devoted to Medea are attributed to Ennius, at least two more

⁴⁷ *OA* 406–410.

⁴⁸ Karanika 2017, pp. 124–136.

⁴⁹ *OA* 431–441.

⁵⁰ Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* II. 553–558.

⁵¹ Braund 1993, pp. 11–17 with literature.

⁵² Blatter 1984, pp. 591–599.

⁵³ Arcellaschi 1990.

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are known by Pacuvius and Accius accordingly.⁵⁴ However, the complete narrative of the myth in Latin did not appear before *Argonautica* by Publius Terentius Varro *Atacinus* (82–35 BCE), which –according to the stern judgement of Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (Quint. 10. 1 87)– was merely a translation of Apollonius Rhodius. Unfortunately, we learn about that only from the fragments.⁵⁵

On the other hand, Gaius Valerius Flaccus followed a similar –but not identical– scheme to that of *Orpheus' Argonautica* in his *Argonautica*,⁵⁶ composed in eight books in 70 CE and dedicated to Vespasian, which remained unfinished.⁵⁷ Chiron with the infant Achilles in his hands came down from Mount Pelion to join the sacrificial feast of the Argonauts on the seashore on the night before the ship sailed off.⁵⁸ The poetic contest between the two soothsayers is presented indirectly to create a contrast between the epic narrative of the Homer-type *rhapsodes* (Chiron) and the epyllian epos of the song of the Thracian.⁵⁹ The words of Peleus (1.255–273) present the heroic *παιδεία* of the Centaur, which he was to suggest to Achilles with his epic songs about wars and battles. However, Valerius Flaccus did not include them in his *Argonautica*, while he adduced the entire poetic narrative of Orpheus, who –unlike the *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius and the *Orphic Argonautica*– had nothing in common with Orphic theogony, but presented the prehistory of the Golden Fleece and the mythology of Phryxus and Helle. The episode marks the start of the perilous undertaking and its eschatological projections.

The motif of the contest between Orpheus and Chiron was revived– often only by association– in the works of the Roman poets from the so-called “Golden” and especially from the “Silver Age.” The scene with the magic power over Nature of Orpheus’ song and music –taken out of its initial context– appeared in the chorus score of *Hercules Oetaeus*

⁵⁴ Braund 1993, p. 13; Arcellaschi 1990.

⁵⁵ Courtney 1993, pp. 236–253.

⁵⁶ Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 255–273.

⁵⁷ White 2007, pp. 252–264.

⁵⁸ Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 1. 255.

⁵⁹ Hunter 2005, pp. 149–168, see particularly pp. 153–155; Torres-Murciano2015, pp. 165–184, see particularly p. 174.

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(1031–1060) of Pseudo-Seneca,⁶⁰ in whose description it is located around Mount Athos, beneath the heights of the Thracian Rhodope:

*True sang the bard beneath the heights of Thracian Rhodope, fitting the word to his Pierian lyre, e'en Orpheus, Calliope's blest son, that naught for endless life is made. At his sweet strains the rushing torrents' roar was stilled, and, forgetful of their eager flight, the waters ceased their flow; and, while the river stayed to hear, the far Bistonians thought their Hebrus had failed the Getan. The woods came with their birds to him, yea, perched among the trees they came; or if, in the high air soaring, some wandering bird caught sound of the charming song, his drooping wings sank earthward. Athos broke off his crags, bringing the Centaurs as he came, and next to Rhodope he stood, his snows melted by the music; the Dryad, leaving her oaken haunts, sped to the singer's side. To hear thy song, with their very lairs the wild beasts came, and close to the fearless herds the Marmaric lion crouched; does felt no fear of wolves, and the serpent fled her gloomy den, her venom at last forgot.*⁶¹

Silius Italicus (ca. 28–ca. 103 CE) in his Latin epic poem *Punica* also made a hint in Book 11 (451, 460, p. 151)⁶² about the scene with the contest between Chiron and Orpheus, in which Centaur remains enchanted by the musical talents of the Thracian singer.

Precisely these reflections of the mythical-literary narrative, resurrected by the Roman poets, seems to be projected in the outlines group of images of the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*, in which the image of the Centaur is also integrated: simultaneously functioning as a guard of the entrance to the World Beyond, and personalised in the figure of the wise centaur Chiron.

⁶⁰ See *Herc. Fur.* 569–576; *Med.* 625–629.

⁶¹ Translated by Frank Justus Miller. Available at: <https://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaHerculesOetaeus2.html> [Last access 5 February 2021]

⁶² Rupert 1798.

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The ancient artist (and the person who ordered his work of art?) associated in the scene with Orpheus surrounded by the animals enchanted by his music and song the figure of the mystagogue -priest and the magician, who were able to pass through spaces and to guide from the world of the living to the World Beyond. The image of a centaur in combination with Pan/Silenus builds harmoniously not only a Dionysian context, but also adds funerary aspects to the analysed composition. Other fantastic mythological figures, some of which markedly exotic, additionally indicating the World Beyond and its deforming discourse, are also intertwined in the theme among the real wild animals.

The analysis of some mythological figures in the pictorial composition *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* in the context of the combined evidence from the mythical-poetic tradition about the journey of the Argonauts could seek a possible literary context of the scene. In the light of the outlined mythical-poetic background, the scene would function as an impressive visualisation of the faith in the ability of (some?) mortals, possibly belonging to certain religious communities (connected with Christian Gnosticism), to perform unimpeded the transition after the end of their days on earth under the competent leadership of Orpheus and his mystic music/song. Gnosticism comprised numerous different dualistic teachings and mysterial sects that flourished precisely in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, before its decline in the 4th century and its blending with other movements. The period between the 2nd and the 3rd century was also the time of the most intensive propagation of the pictorial theme *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*. Such an interpretation would explain the presence of the scene predominantly in sepulchral constructions and a marked funerary. The images of the scene in which fantastic mythological figures are absent could be interpreted as reduced and simplified visualisations of the theme that can be reconstructed here based on mythical-literary reminiscences.

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JOHN LYDUS, HELVIUS VINDICIANUS, AND THE CIRCULATION OF LATIN GYNAECOLOGICAL TEXTS IN SIXTH- CENTURY CONSTANTINOPE

RAF PRAET¹

Abstract

This paper focuses on the sixth-century historian John Lydus, who, next to an interest in Latin, exhibited a great interest in and knowledge of gynaecological texts. Almost all of his sources on gynaecology are Greek. However, in *Mens.* IV.26, Lydus vaguely mentions his use of Latin sources. We shall compare this passage to the works of the fourth-century Latin physician Helvius Vindicianus, hypothesising that he was one of Lydus' sources. A readership of Vindicianus in Constantinople in the sixth century sheds light on the exchange of medical texts between the "Latin" West and the "Greek" East in late antiquity.

Keywords: *John Lydus, Helvius Vindicianus, late antique gynaecology and embryology, Latin in Constantinople.*

John Lydus: a Learned Bureaucrat with an Interest in Latin

John Lydus, (ca. AD 490 – ca. 565),² was a learned bureaucrat in the praetorian prefecture of the East in Constantinople, where he rose to the prestigious office of *cornicularius*. He made himself noticed to emperor Justinian for whom he delivered, after 530, or after 542, an encomium. John's praise of the emperor impressed Justinian,

¹ Dr. Raf Praet (1989) studied classics at Ghent University (Belgium) and obtained in 2018 his PhD degree in ancient history at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) and Ghent University with his dissertation "From Rome to Constantinople. Antiquarian Echoes of Cultural Trauma in the Sixth Century."

² Ioannes Lydus 75 *PLRE* II.612-615. For introductions to the life and works of John Lydus see Momigliano 1966, p. 187; Carney 1971, pp. 3-19; Bandy 1983, pp. ix-xxxviii; Maas 1992, pp. 28-37; Kelly 2004, p. 11-17; Schamp 2006, pp. xiii-lxxvi; Treadgold 2007, pp. 258-264; Turfa 2012, pp. 8-11; Bandy 2013, pp. 1-29; Bjornlie 2013, pp. 113-117.

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who commissioned a history of his Persian wars (527–532),³ and who promoted John to a teaching position: around 543, Lydus was appointed to a chair of Latin language and literature at the “university” of Constantinople.⁴

In his early teaching years, John composed two of his erudite works,⁵ “On the Months (*De mensibus*)”,⁶ a treatise in four books on Roman chronology, and “On Celestial Signs (*De ostentis*)”,⁷ which formed a compilation of translations from Latin treatises on various portents, and which constituted an elaborate defence of the validity of omens for the prediction of the future.⁸ Around 551-552, John retired from the praetorian prefecture.⁹ However, he probably continued his teaching after he retired from office. In this period, he composed his last treatise, “On the Magistracies of the

³ *Magistr.* III.26. On his *History*, see *CHAP* 248. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020, p. xxxi, p. 255.

⁴ In Constantinople, there existed an “institution of higher education”, the precise nature of which remains unclear. Kazhdan 1991, p. 2143. We therefore use the term university as a conventional term. *Magistr.* III.26.1-III.30.10. See Chastagnol 1960, p. 65, n. 58; Caimi 1984, pp. 79-81; Maas 1992, pp. 35-36; Kelly 2004, p. 13; Schamp 2006, pp. xliii-xlv; Domenici 2007, p. 9; Bjornlie 2013, p. 114. Treadgold 2007, p. 261 proposed the earlier date of around 533 for Lydus’ professorship.

⁵ Carney 1971, p. 11; Caimi 1984, pp. 66-68, p. 286; Maas 1992, p. 10; Kaldellis 2003, p. 313; Schamp 2006, pp. xvi-xvii; Domenici 2007, p. 9; Treadgold 2007, p. 261. Internal evidence points to the *De mensibus* being composed before the *De ostentis*, Carney 1971, p. 65; Caimi 1984, pp. 66-68; Schamp 2006, pp. lxxx-lxxxiii, although Lydus might have worked on them simultaneously, Caimi 1984, pp. 66-68.

⁶ *CHAP* 251. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020, pp. 256-257. On *De mensibus* see Caimi 1984, pp. 68-71; Schamp 2006, pp. lxxxiv-xcix.

⁷ *CHAP* 250. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020, p. 256. On *De ostentis* see Caimi 1984, pp. 71-79; Maas 1992, p. 107, Schamp 2006, pp. xcix-cxv.

⁸ The oeuvre of John Lydus has endured the most problematic textual transmission. Especially the textual transmission of Lydus’ *De mensibus*, Schamp 2006, pp. lxxxiv-xcix, Zingg 2019, p. 558, and, to a lesser extent, *De ostentis*, Schamp 2006, pp. xcix-cxv, is notoriously difficult. In anticipation of the new edition of the *De mensibus*, which is being prepared by E. Zingg, we revert to the edition of Wünsch, published in 1898, which remains, if flawed, the best option currently available, Schamp 2006, p. xciii. E. Zingg was very kind in providing me with remarks on the textual transmission of *De mensibus* and the passage which I discuss in this paper. I am very indebted to his contribution. For the Greek text of *De ostentis*, the use of the second edition of Wachsmuth 1897 is advisable. See Schamp 2006, p. ci.

⁹ On Lydus’ retirement see Carney 1971, p. 11; Caimi 1984, p. 81-83; Schamp 2006, pp. xlv-xlix. The treatise was written after his retirement, Caimi 1984, pp. 81-83, and internal evidence points to the *De magistratibus* having been written after the *De ostentis*, Schamp 2006, p. lxxxiii. Carney 1971, p. 1, 11, dated the *De magistratibus* to the 550’s, with Books I and II written before, and Book III after Lydus’ retirement. Schamp 2006, p. xxxi, placed the composition of the *De magistratibus* after 545. In an elaborate analysis, which also treated the hypothesis of Lydus writing under Justin II, Caimi concluded that the *De magistratibus* was concluded not long after 552, probably in December 554, Caimi 1984, pp. 111-124.

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Roman State (*De magistratibus*)”, in which he described different Roman military and civil institutions from their mythological origins up to the present.¹⁰ He died between 557 and 561.¹¹

As a professor of Latin, John Lydus exhibited an intricate knowledge of and interest in the different aspects of the Latin language.¹² Throughout his works, he quoted several Latin authors, such as Apuleius, Ovid and Vergil.¹³ He upheld his historical argument by various etymological explanations from Latin, and made numerous translations of Latin sources into Greek, most notably in his *De ostentis*.¹⁴

John Lydus and Gynaecology in Late Antiquity

John Lydus exhibited a keen interest in gynaecology and embryology, an interest which, until recently, has remained unnoticed.¹⁵ In the numerous passages which he devoted to this science, John does not abstain from indicating his sources. We give an overview of Lydus’ passages with gynaecological content, alongside a short description, and his sources, in an appendix to this paper.

Despite his interest in the Latin language, the vast majority of John’s sources on gynaecology are Greek sources. Only two passages have a reference to Latin sources. *Ost.* 44¹⁶ has a reference to Apuleius. Apart from this reference, one extensive passage, *Mens.* IV.26,¹⁷ has a vague mention of Lydus’ Latin sources on gynaecology:

¹⁰ *CHAP* 252. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020, pp. 257-258. On *De magistratibus* see Schamp 2006, pp. cxix-cxxxiii.

¹¹ Maas 1992, p. 11; Schamp 2006, p. xlvi.

¹² For John Lydus’ knowledge of the language as a professor of Latin, see Carney 1971b, pp. 3, 48-49, 48, 61, 129; Caimi 1984, p. 80; Debuissou 1991, p. 56; Rochette 1997, pp. 253-254; Rochette 1998, p. 471, n. 3; Rochette 2012, p. 330; Kaldellis 2005b, p. 8; Schamp 2006, pp. lxxiii-lxxvi; Bowersock 2009, p. 43; Rochette 2012, p. 330. Schamp 2008, p. 37 goes even as far as to characterise Lydus’ knowledge of Latin as “Latinomanie”, as he is one of the Greek authors with the most conspicuous use of Latin. However, Carney 1971b, p. 48 characterised Lydus’ Latin as “shaky.” The readers of John’s works were deemed to know Latin, Baldwin 1995.

¹³ On Apuleius in Lydus, see Baldwin 1982, p. 83. On Lydus’ use of Ovid, see Rota 2017. On the appearance of Vergil in John Lydus see Baldwin 1982, pp. 83-85.

¹⁴ On Lydus’ translations of Latin treatises, see Domenici 2007, p. 8, 28; Turfa 2012, p. 11.

¹⁵ A first overview of John Lydus’ outlook on gynaecology with an analysis of the reasons behind his interest in gynaecology can be found in Praet 2021.

¹⁶ Wachsmuth 1897, pp. 97-98.

¹⁷ Wünsch 1898, pp. 84-86.

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Οἱ τῶν Ῥωμαίων τὴν φυσικὴν ἱστορίαν συγγράφοντες, or, “Those of the Romans who write treatises on natural history.”

In order to trace the possible Latin sources of John Lydus’ gynaecological passage in *Mens.* IV.26, a short digression into the Latin authors on gynaecology in late antiquity is warranted.¹⁸ The gynaecologist Soranus of Ephesus (1st-2nd century)¹⁹ wrote his *Gynaecology* in Greek but enjoyed reasoned popularity in late antiquity in the Latin West through several translations²⁰ and derivative texts.²¹ In the fifth century, he was translated into Latin by Caelius Aurelianus²² and by a person called Muscio or Mustio.²³ The work of Soranus formed the main inspiration for the third book, on gynaecology, of the *Euporiston* of Theodorus Priscianus (late 4th-early 5th century).²⁴ This doctor initially wrote his treatise in Greek but translated it himself into Latin. He migrated from Africa to Constantinople, where he obtained the position of *archiater* at the imperial court. Apart from these works, we can also mention the translation into Latin of two works from the Hippocratic Corpus, *Diseases of Women I* and *II*, in Italy, between the fourth and sixth centuries,²⁵ and a mass of anonymous compilations, some of them attributed to Galen, Hippocrates, Pliny and even Cleopatra.²⁶

Regrettably, none of the works as we have them now of the above-mentioned authors exhibits any parallel to *Mens.* IV.26 in John Lydus. However, one of the possible sources for this passage in John Lydus is the teacher of Theodorus Priscianus, Helvius Vindicianus. Vindicianus²⁷ was active as a doctor in late fourth-century

¹⁸ For an introduction in the field, see Green 2000, pp. 1-36.

¹⁹ For an introduction into the life and works of Soranus, see Temkin 1956, pp. xxiii-xxv.

²⁰ Temkin 1956, p. xxix, pp. xliv-xlv.

²¹ Green 2000, p. 32. The *Liber geneciae ad Soteris obs[t]etrix* is a late antique conflation of materials from both Pseudo-Cleopatra and Soranus, Green 2000, pp. 18-19. For Pseudo-Cleopatra, see below.

²² Caelius Aurelianus 10 *PLRE* II.201; Green 2000, p. 7.

²³ Mustio *PLRE* II.769; Green 2000, pp. 21-22. Selections from Muscio circulated separately in the treatise *Secreta secretorum mulierum*, Green 2000, p. 28.

²⁴ Theodorus Priscianus 8 *PLRE* I.728; Green 2000, p. 33.

²⁵ Green 2000, p. 11.

²⁶ De Moulin 1964, p. 48. For the anonymous compilations and fragments, see Green 2000, pp. 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 31, 32 and 34; for Pseudo-Cleopatra, see Green 2000, pp. 8-10; for Pseudo-Galen, see Green 2000, p. 13; Pseudo-Hippocrates, Green 2000, pp. 14-15; Pseudo-Plinius, Green 2000, p. 26.

²⁷ (Helvius) Vindicianus 2 *PLRE* I.967. On this author see Cilliers 2004, pp. 344-346. Also Vindicianus was to some degree indebted to the ideas of his predecessor Soranus, Cilliers 2005, p. 162, 222, 225.

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Carthage. He held several important offices such as the office of the proconsul of Africa and the office of *comes archiatrorum*. Next to the above mentioned Theodorus Priscianus, Vindicianus also counted the church father Augustine amongst his students. One of his works, the *Gynaecia*,²⁸ gives an overview of the different organs and their respective functions. The treatise has an elaborate section on the reproductive system, gynaecology, and embryology, which incorrectly gave its name to the whole of the treatise.²⁹ In the next section, we shall examine the different parallels between these sections on gynaecology and embryology in Vindicianus' *Gynaecia* and section IV.26 in Lydus *De mensibus*.

John Lydus and Helvius Vindicianus

In *Mens.* IV.26, John Lydus gives an overview of the generation of the foetus, the early development of a newborn infant, and the process of disintegration of the human corpse.³⁰ Each of these three phases is structured around the numbers three, nine, and forty.

First, the generation of the foetus is described, with an overview of the first forty days, followed by the further development until birth. In three days, the sperm changes into blood in the uterus and the heart is formed. Lydus mentions that the heart is the first organ to be formed and the last part to disintegrate after death. He continues with an allegorical reading of the number three, explaining that it is an uneven number that is responsible for the process of generation. Next comes the mention of the number

²⁸ The complex transmission history of the *Gynecia* has long precluded an acceptable edition of the text, Cilliers 2005, pp. 154-156. In this paper, we use the reasoned reconstruction of the text as made by L. Cilliers 2005.

²⁹ A short introduction to the *Gynaecia* can be found in Cilliers 2005, pp. 153-154. For an overview of Vindicianus' detailed work on foetal development, see Cilliers 2004, pp. 355-360.

³⁰ The passage enjoyed itself a reasoned popularity in the Middle Ages as a separate treatise, which was erroneously ascribed to different authors such as Splinius (a corruption of Plinius), Libanius and John of Damascus. On this so-called *Tractatum Splinii*, see Wünsch 1898, pp. xxv-xxix; Cumont 1918, p. 278, Ceulemans et al. 2013, p. 62, Zingg 2019, p. 536. The most complete version of the passage is the one in the so-called *Florilegium Coislinianum* Ψ 28, alphabetical anthology dating from the end of 9th to the beginning of the 10th centuries, a recension not known to Wünsch, which has recently been edited by Ceulemans et al. 2013, pp. 75-77. Any reasoning regarding *Mens.* IV.26 should be based on Wünsch's text and the quotation in the *Florilegium Coislinianum*, Zingg 2019, p. 540.

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nine; in nine days the flesh and marrow of the embryo are developed. Finally, in 40 days, all features of the human body are extant.³¹

After the development in the first 40 days of pregnancy, Lydus continues with the development of the foetus until birth, whilst explicitly making the analogy between the first 40 days and the 9 months of the pregnancy: *Ὀμοίως κατὰ ἀναλογίαν τῶν ἡμερῶν καὶ ἐπὶ μηνῶν* or “Likewise analogously with the days it is thus also in the case of the months.”³² In the third month, we have movements of the foetus in the uterus, and by the ninth month the process of human development is completed and the child is born. Next, Lydus dwells on the different developments of girls and boys. Girls are born in nine months, whereas boys are born in ten months. Lydus explains this difference by giving a numerological analysis of the number nine, which is connected to the goddess Selene and to matter, and of the number ten, which is a perfect number. Warm sperm results in quick coagulation which in turn is responsible for a boy, whereas colder semen results in slow coagulation and, in turn, in the development of a girl. Lydus asserts this principle by the observation that aborted male foetuses are fully formed, whereas female aborted foetuses remain unformed.

Second, the development of the foetus is followed by a description of the first 40 days of the newborn infant. Three days after birth the infant loses its swaddling clothes. After nine days it gains strength and endures touch. Finally, after 40 days, an infant can smile and recognize its mother.

The third and last part of *Mens.* IV.26 applies the same numbers 3, 9 and 40 to the process of human disintegration. Three days after death a corpse loses its external features. Nine days *post mortem* all parts of the body dissolve except for the heart. And after 40 days also the heart is the last part of the body to disintegrate. These three stages of human disintegration are taken into account in the commemoration of the dead on the third, ninth and fortieth day after death.³³

³¹ Also Censorinus, *De die natali* 11 states that an embryo is formed in 40 days; Roscher 1907, p. 106.

³² This phrase is, however, not a genuine part of the text of Lydus’ *De mensibus*, Zingg 2019, p. 540, n. 103.

³³ Commemorating the dead on these days is an ancient Christian practice which is already mentioned in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. For a history of this Christian practice in antiquity and late antiquity, and its affinities with pagan practices, see Cumont 1918.

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The parallels between Lydus' statements and the work of Vindicianus can be found in the first part of *Mens.* IV.26, Lydus' description of the process of human development.³⁴ As in the case of John Lydus, Vindicianus *Gyn.* 23, states that the heart is the first organ to be formed and that the whole of human development is completed in 40 days.³⁵

Mens. IV.26 bears furthermore a closer resemblance to chapter 21 of Vindicianus' *Gynecia*.³⁶ This chapter starts with the statement that the human being is completely developed in forty days or in thirty days. Foetuses which develop in 30 days are born in the seventh month, and foetuses that develop in 40 days are born in the ninth month. The chapter continues with a systematic description of the developments in each of the nine months of pregnancy, with the mention of movement in the third month and the birth of the infant in the ninth month. The chapter concludes with remarks on the health of the pregnant woman and on difficulties during labour.

We can see that Lydus borrowed several parts of chapter 21 to upholster his numerological account of human development in *Mens.* IV.26. Lydus namely also mentions the complete development of the foetus in 40 days, and afterwards selected Vindicianus' statements on the third and ninth month to fit his numerological scheme.

Furthermore, the structure of chapter 21 in Vindicianus resembles the structure of Lydus' description. In Vindicianus, a description of the first 30/40 days is followed by an overview of the months. Likewise, Lydus analyses the first 40 days before passing over to a selective overview of the months, "Likewise analogously with the days it is thus also in the case of the months."

Moreover, Vindicianus singles out either the seventh or the ninth month of the pregnancy as the possible moments of birth.³⁷ Vindicianus' avoidance of the eight-

³⁴ Roscher 1907, pp. 104-108, made an analysis of the possible Greek sources and influences, mentioning, next to pythagorean influences, influences of Empedocles, Diocles, Xenocrates, Aristotle and the Stoics. Also Nardi 1971, p. 622, mentions as possible sources as Aristotle, Diocles of Carystus and Empedocles, apparently ignoring that Lydus mentioned Latin sources. Franz Cumont 1918, pp. 278-279, did not believe that Lydus used Latin sources and pointed to a Pythagorean eclectic philosopher such as Numenius.

³⁵ Cilliers 2005, pp. 182-185, p. 227.

³⁶ Cilliers 2005, pp. 180-183.

³⁷ Cilliers 2005, pp. 180-183.

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month³⁸ might have influenced John Lydus, who mentions elsewhere in his *De mensibus* that the eight-month is an ominous month for birth (*Mens.* IV.162):

*The number eight is female, indefinite and imperfect. Hence also Nicomachus calls the eighth month a month of ill-timed birth, as the period of eight months does not stand in any relation to the harmonic principles. Therefore, eight-month foetuses are not born fully developed. Standing between the numbers which bear developed infants, the number eight itself is imperfect. Sharing in every material force, the number takes on powers associated with matter.*³⁹

Returning to *Mens.* IV.26, we can also discern a parallel between Lydus' assertion that warm semen generates male babies and Vindicianus, *Gyn.* 25, which states that a woman pregnant of a boy has a reddish complexion because a boy is warmer than a girl.⁴⁰

In the table below, we give a schematic overview of the parallels described above.

Passage in John Lydus	Parallel Vindicianus
<i>Mens.</i> IV.26 <i>Οἱ τῶν Ῥωμαίων τὴν φυσικὴν ἱστορίαν συγγράφοντες φασιν</i>	
1.1. DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOETUS - 40 FIRST DAYS	
-day 3 sperm changes into blood in the uterus.	

³⁸ Cilliers 2004, p. 362; Cilliers 2005, p. 224.

³⁹ Ὅτι ὁ τῆς ὀγδοῦδος ἀριθμὸς θῆλυς καὶ ἀπειρος καὶ ἀτελής· ὅθεν καὶ παρὰ τῷ Νικομάχῳ ἡλιτόμημος καλεῖται· ὁ γὰρ ὀκτάμημος χρόνος πρὸς οὐδένα τῶν ἀρμονικῶν ἔχων φαίνεται λόγον. Ὅθεν οὐ τελεσφορεῖται τὰ ὀκταμηναῖα· μέσος γὰρ ὢν τῶν τελεσφόρων ἀριθμῶν αὐτὸς ἀτελής εὐρίσκεται. πάσης γὰρ ὑλικῆς δυνάμεως μετέχων τὰς περὶ τὴν ὕλην εἴληφε δυνάμεις. *Mens.* IV.162, Wunsch 1898, p. 177. The viability of the foetus in the seventh month and the unfavorable quality of the eight month were widely accepted in the Greco-Roman world, in Hippocratic writings, Aristotle, Soranus and in Jewish literature; Hanson 1987; Cilliers 2004, pp. 362-363; Cilliers 2005, pp. 223-224.

⁴⁰ Cilliers 2005, pp. 184-187.

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-heart is the first to be formed and the last part which disintegrates.	<i>Vind.23 Primum autem cor hominis fingi dicitur</i>
—3 exegesis: three is a first number and an uneven number which starts the process of generation.	
-day 9 formation of flesh and marrow.	
-day 40 human fully formed.	<i>Vind.21 Omnis enim figura formatur in XL diebus</i> <i>Vind.23</i>
1.2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOETUS - MONTHLY DEVELOPMENT	
<i>Ὁμοίως κατὰ ἀναλογίαν τῶν ἡμερῶν καὶ ἐπὶ μηνῶν</i>	
-month 3 movement in the uterus.	<i>Vind.21 et motum facit infans</i>
-month 9 completion of the foetus. The foetus hastens to exit the womb. <i>ἐπὶ δὲ τοῦ ἐννάτου μηνὸς παντελῶς ἀπαρτίζεσθαι καὶ πρὸς ἔξοδον σπεύδειν.</i>	<i>Vind.21 VIII mense maturum movet infantem natura</i>
-girls born in 9 months, boys in 10 months.	
—9 exegesis Selene, matter 10 exegesis perfection.	
-warm sperm - quick coagulation - boy. -colder sperm - slow coagulation - girl.	<i>Vind.25 et bene rubet in puero quia calidior est puella</i>
—assertion: formed male aborted fetus, unformed female aborted fetus.	

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2. DEVELOPMENT AFTER BIRTH	
-day 3 after birth: child loses swaddling clothes.	
-day 9 after birth: child gains strength and endures touch.	
-day 40 after birth: ability to smile and recognize the mother.	
3. DISINTEGRATION AFTER DEATH	
-day 3 <i>post mortem</i> : loss of external features.	
-day 9 <i>post mortem</i> : dissolution of the body except for the heart.	
-day 40 <i>post mortem</i> : the heart is the last part of the body to dissolve.	
—commemorations of the dead on days 3, 9 and 40 after death.	
<i>Mens. IV.162</i> the eight-month is an ill-timed moment for birth.	<i>Vind.21 qui vero in XXX diebus formatur in VII mense nascitur, qui autem in XL diebus formatur in VIII mense nascitur.</i>

The Circulation of Latin Medical Texts in Sixth-century Constantinople

John Lydus' borrowings from the Latin *Gynecia* of Helvius Vindicianus shed further light on the circulation of Latin medical texts in the Greek eastern part of the later Roman Empire. At some point in time, Vindicianus' *Gynecia* migrated from Africa to

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Constantinople, most possibly with the help of Vindicianus' pupil Theodorus Priscianus, who is known to have moved from Africa to Constantinople.

Our analysis shows that the Latin treatise of Vindicianus had a readership in Constantinople as late as the sixth century, in a period in which there was an intense and continuous exchange of both medical texts as medical personnel between the Latin western and the Greek eastern parts of the (former) Roman Empire.

In the Ostrogothic realm of Theoderic (493–526), there was an intense interest in and proliferation of technical and medical texts,⁴¹ which might have been transferred to Constantinople, after the byzantine conquest of Ostrogothic Italy (535–540) and the exodus of the Ostrogothic court to Constantinople. For instance, the intellectual and Ostrogothic bureaucrat Cassiodorus (ca. 485 – ca. 585)⁴² conceived during his service in the Ostrogothic state of a translation program of logical and mathematical works, and had a keen interest in medicine and architecture.⁴³ After the toppling of the Ostrogothic regime,⁴⁴ Cassiodorus went to Constantinople,⁴⁵ perhaps with some of the medical texts which he had translated and copied.⁴⁶ After his stay (or detention) in Constantinople (ca. 540 – 554),⁴⁷ he founded his Vivarium monastery in the South of Italy, which benefitted from Cassiodorus' close connection with the scriptoria of Ravenna for its scientific and practical texts.⁴⁸ Significantly, in his theoretical outline of Christian higher learning, the *Institutions on Divine and Secular Learning*,⁴⁹ Cassiodorus mentions Caelius Aurelianus, one of the Latin sources on gynaecology.⁵⁰

⁴¹ Baader 1985; Cracco Ruggini 2008.

⁴² An overview of the life, career, and works of Cassiodorus can be found in Schanz 1920, pp. 92-95; Carney 1971b, pp. 97-99; O'Donnell 1979; Giardina 2006, pp. 22-25; Bjornlie 2013, pp. 16-19; Bjornlie 2017, pp. 434-438; Lozovsky 2016, pp. 322-324.

⁴³ Cracco Ruggini 2008, pp. 30-31, gives an elucidating sketch of Cassiodorus' scientific activities during his political career.

⁴⁴ Vessey 2004, pp. 14-15; Heydemann 2016, pp. 36-40.

⁴⁵ Van de Vyver 1931, pp. 254-260; Momigliano 1966, p. 193; O'Donnell 1979, pp. 105-107; Vessey 2004, pp. 14-15; Bjornlie 2013, pp. 17-18. On the evidence of Cassiodorus' stay in Constantinople, see Momigliano 1966, pp. 191-193; O'Donnell 1979, pp. 132-133.

⁴⁶ On the medicinal science in Cassiodorus' *Variae*, see Marano 2011, *Var.* II.39 and Lozovsky 2016, pp. 319-320; *Var.* VI.19.

⁴⁷ Momigliano 1966, p. 193; O'Donnell 1979, pp. 131, 135.

⁴⁸ Cracco Ruggini 2008, p. 29. On the transmission of medicinal texts at Vivarium specifically, see Courcelle 1943, pp. 382-388.

⁴⁹ Schanz 1920, pp. 103-105; Peretto 1993, p. 219.

⁵⁰ *Inst.* I.XXI.2; Mynors 1937, p. 79; *PLRE* II.201; Courcelle 1943, p. 384.

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The exchange of medical texts in the sixth century was also accompanied by an exchange of medical personnel. A noteworthy example in this regard is the career of the Greek physician Anthimus (ca. 475 – ca. 525) at the courts of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric and the Frankish king Theuderic I.⁵¹ Closer to the network of John Lydus, the Lydian physician Alexander of Tralles (ca. 525 – ca. 605) settled in Rome after having travelled and practised in Spain, Italy and Gaul.⁵² This Alexander was the brother of Anthemius of Tralles, one of the architects of the Hagia Sophia church, who can be connected to the network of the praetorian prefect Phocas – a network to which John Lydus also belonged.⁵³

As regards John Lydus, we could situate his consultation and use of the *Gynecia* within the common practice in antiquity of an interested lay public which read medical texts. John Lydus read Greek and Latin texts on gynaecology and embryology to mine these texts for data that he could use in his own narrative.⁵⁴

However, one question remains as to Lydus' use of Vindicianus. If John Lydus took a great interest in showcasing his knowledge of Latin sources, predominantly by citing or naming them, why did he not mention Vindicianus by name? As mentioned above, Lydus in *Mens.* IV.26 only vaguely referred to “Those of the Romans who write treatises on natural history.” A possible answer could be found in the perceived lowly status of Vindicianus' work, which Cilliers describes as:

*It was most probably written as a textbook for young medical students, or as a vademecum for doctors when travelling, or as a self-help book in private houses, in short, a kind of “Idiot’s Guide” on medical matters.*⁵⁵

⁵¹ Anthimus 3 *PLRE* II.100.

⁵² Alexander 8 (of Tralles) *PLRE* III.44-45; Kaldellis 2013, p. 356.

⁵³ On the network of Phocas, Alexander of Tralles and John Lydus, see Kaldellis 2013. Another link which could connect Alexander of Tralles to John Lydus is their common origin in Lydia. On the importance of local ties for furthering one's career in the administration, see Kelly 2004, pp. 173-174, 184-185. For the presence and danger of cliques in the bureaucracy which were based on local ties see Kelly 2004, pp. 48-49.

⁵⁴ Praet 2021.

⁵⁵ Cilliers 2005, p. 153.

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Perhaps Lydus was not that keen to show to his readers that his knowledge of the development of the foetus derived from a basic introduction to the subject. Moreover, we could mention Lydus' antiquarian tendency to mention only sources from hallowed antiquity, passing over in silence more recent works.⁵⁶

Appendix

Passage	Description	Sources Mentioned
<i>Mens.</i> II.12	The perfection of infants born in seven months.	Hippocrates, <i>Περὶ Ἑπταμήνων</i> , Kühn, <i>Medicorum Graecorum Opera</i> , I.444 = <i>Doxographi Graeci</i> 428a16b Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> 36D
<i>Mens.</i> IV.26	The development of the foetus, the development after birth, and the disintegration after death.	“Those of the Romans who write treatises on natural history”
<i>Mens.</i> IV.31	An infant does not require food in the womb.	
<i>Mens.</i> IV.40	An infant does not have teeth in the womb.	Stoics <i>Doxographi Graeci</i> 486a8 sqq.
<i>Mens.</i> IV.65	Myrtle strengthens the body of the newly born child.	
<i>Mens.</i> IV.66	Women with the opening of their uterus in a straight line are prolific, but	“The natural philosophers”

⁵⁶ On John's avoidance to cite later and inferior sources and on his predilection of namedropping prestigious, ancient sources, see Carney 1971b, pp. 30, 52, 53, 64, 91, 57-58.

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	that those having it in a crooked line are barren.	
<i>Mens.</i> IV.80	An infant walks before it talks.	Numenius
<i>Mens.</i> IV.84	The opinions of Plato and Empedocles on the causes of monstrous births.	Plato (Strato) <i>Doxographi Graeci</i> 421a1, Empedocles <i>Doxographi Graeci</i> 420a20
<i>Mens.</i> IV.89	Drinking of cold water during the festival of Hera against the occurrence of twin births or monstrous births. Miraculous multiple births during the reign of Hadrian.	Aristotle, <i>Historia Animalium</i> VII.4 Heraclides
<i>Mens.</i> IV.102	The month <i>Quintilis</i> changed into <i>Julius</i> because Caesar was born in July.	“The ancients”, “The historians”, Valens <i>Hist. Rom. Fragm.</i> (ed. H. Peter 378)
<i>Mens.</i> IV.105	Caesar born in seven months. His birth is the reason for the change of the month’s name and the reason for his prodigy.	“Many of the historians”
<i>Mens.</i> IV.106	Advice to women to abstain from sexual activity in July, to preserve their health.	
<i>Mens.</i> IV.148	Information on the protective goddesses in childbirth: Ilithyia and Artemis.	Plutarch
<i>Mens.</i> IV.162	The eight-month of the pregnancy is an ominous month for birth.	Ps.-Nicomachus, <i>Theologumena Arithm.</i> p. 55,25 Ast.

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Ost. 44	Abortion of the pregnant Marcia, spouse of Cato, by the thunderbolt Arges/Lampros.	Apuleius
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Abbreviations

CHAP

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THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST ON LATE ANTIQUE IVORIES

YANNIS D. VARALIS¹

Abstract

The scene of the Nativity in late antique monumental painting, i.e. the fresco decoration of the catacombs and the mural mosaics and paintings of Early Christian churches, is very rare.² The scene is considerably more frequent on stone sarcophagi, mainly in the west part of the late Roman Empire, but as has been aptly observed, sarcophagi were not easily accessible nor were all their sides visible.³ How was portrayed the scene of the birth of Jesus, the central figure of the Christian religion? Which components of the representation of the Nativity showed the human and the divine natures of the Son of God? In this study I shall focus on the versions of the Nativity preserved on late antique ivories, mainly because their iconography would have had the approval of higher circles of the society, secular and ecclesiastical, due to the high cost of the material and the fewness of the workshops that produced such items of luxury.⁴

Keywords: *Nativity, Jesus, birth, painting, Late Roman Empire*

Twelve ivories dated to the period from about 400 to the first decades of the seventh century and kept at European museums and collections bear the representation of the Nativity of Christ. These ivories either are objects destined to be used in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy or are parts of the decoration of sacred books, receptacles or pieces of furniture used during the liturgy. Seven of them are plaques that were made for the revetment of Gospels' covers, caskets and thrones. The other five are pyxes, i.e. cylindrical boxes with separate lids and bottoms which were

¹Yannis D. Varalis is associate professor in byzantine archaeology at the Department of History, Archaeology, and Social Anthropology, University of Thessaly, Greece.

² For the iconography of the scene, see Leclercq 1935; Réau 1957, pp. 213-255; Wilhelm 1970; Ristow 1971. The earliest known depictions of the Nativity in Rome are found in fragments on the south wall of the sanctuary of Santa Maria Antiqua dated to the papacy of John VII (705-707) and in the oratory of the same Pope at Saint Peter's. Wilpert 1916, vol. IV, pl. 156.2 and vol. III, pl. 113.2, respectively.

³Milinović 1999.

⁴ Cutler (1985, pp. 20-37, *passim*) argues for a cost lower than usually supposed, but it was nevertheless high enough and saved only for the upper classes of the society; bone carving has always been less expensive.

mostly used to hoard relics, incense or particles of the Eucharistic bread. Among the pyxes, only one new appeared quite recently in the art trade and probably can be dated, if it is authentic, to the sixth century.

The ivories under study here can be divided into three groups, according to the iconography of the manger containing the divine infant Jesus wrapped in swaddling bands. The first group, which is the earliest of the three, includes plaques and pyxes on which the manger is presented in the center of the composition, with the ox and the ass above the Child. The Virgin and Joseph are placed on either side and, if there is enough space, the Adoration of the Magi or the Shepherds' staring at the star are also included. The second group comprises pyxes and plaques belonging to five-parted ivory diptychs dating from the end of the fifth to the end of the sixth century. The examples of this group show the Virgin Mary reclined on a bed or seated on a throne, next to the manger. In front of the crib a woman named Salome holds her hand by the wrist. In fact, Salome questioned the virginity of the Virgin and in her attempt to touch the Mother of God, her hand was paralyzed; and then a Lord's angel suddenly appeared and told her to touch the Child in order to be healed. The scene is inspired by the account of the episode in the *Protevangelium* of James and the *Evangelium* of Pseudo-Matthew⁵, which seem quite early in date, though it was depicted in Rome only during the period of the



Figure 1

Nevers, Musée de la Faïence et des Beaux-arts Frédéric-Blandin, ivory pyx, inv. no. NOA 20, early fifth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 16)

papacy of Pope Paul I (757-767).⁶ The third group includes plaques and a pyx from the later part of the sixth and the early seventh centuries on which the Nativity is shown in a quite familiar manner: the manger is located behind the bed of the Virgin, which is placed diagonally on the first

⁵ *Protevangelium Iakobi*, ed. Tischendorf 1853, ch. XX, pp. 36-38. *Incipit liber de ortu beatae Mariae et infantia Salvatoris a beato Matthaeo evangelis ta hebraice scriptus et a beato Ieronymo presbytero in latinum translatus*, ed. Tischendorf 1853, ch. XIII.3-5, pp. 74-76; Cf. also Craveri (1990), pp. 22, 80-81.

⁶ Wilpert 1916, vol. IV, pl. 194 (on the south wall of the nave of Santa Maria Antiqua).

level, while Joseph and Salome are depicted in front and/or behind the Mother of God, depending on the available space.

The first group comprises the most ancient ivories known with the scene of the Nativity. The earliest ivory known is a rectangular plaque with the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi,⁷ dated to the beginning of the fifth century and kept today at the Musée de la faïence, Nevers (inv. no. NOA 20) (fig. 1). It belonged to a more complex ivory set, probably a five-part leaf of a diptych with representations of other miracles performed by Jesus, such as the Massacre of the Innocents, the Baptism and the miracle at Cana on the plaque at the Bode Museum, Berlin,⁸ and the Healing of the Woman with an issue of blood, the Exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac and the Healing of the paralytic on the plaque at the British Museum, London,⁹ with which the Nevers plaque has been associated iconographically and stylistically. Moreover, the Nativity scene occupies the oblong narrow panel on the upper part of the Gospel cover kept at the Treasury of the Milan cathedral dating from roughly the same period.¹⁰ The long narrow panel on the lower part displays the Massacre of the Innocents and the side plaques illustrate the Annunciation, Mary's Trial by Ordeal of the Bitter Water, the Three Magi guided by the star, the Twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple, the Baptism and the Entry to Jerusalem. The square with the three Magi, secondary episode of the Nativity narrative, is a rare example of an episode which has become an independent scene at an early date.¹¹ The third ivory plaque comes from the revetment of a wooden box found in Werden, Germany, is currently kept at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (inv. no. 149A-1866), and dates back to the late fifth century.¹² Some scholars have suggested that this is a copy of the time of Charlemagne, around 800,¹³ but I do not share this opinion, since the iconographic, stylistic, and technical links with the Gospel cover at Milan are so close, that we can think of a prototype and a copy that were made

⁷ Volbach 1976, pp. 81-82 no. 114, pl. 60; Volbach 1977, pp. 24-25, fig. 16.

⁸ Volbach 1976, pp. 80-81 no. 112, pl. 60; Volbach 1977, pp. 15-16, 24, fig. 15a.

⁹ Volbach 1976, p. 81 no. 113, pl. 60; Volbach 1977, pp. 15-16, 24, fig. 15b. For both the Berlin and London plaques, cf. Cat. New York 1979, pp. 446-448 nos 406-407 (L. Kötzsche).

¹⁰ Volbach 1976, pp. 84-85 no. 119, pl. 63; Volbach 1977, pp. 13-33, *passim*, figs. 7a-b. Cat. Fort Worth 2007, pp. 256-258 no. 76. The chronology attributed to this cover varies from the fourth to the sixth century; a date around the middle of the fifth century, probably at the end of the first half, would be in my opinion closer to the truth.

¹¹ Cf. Réau 1957, pp. 242-254; Weis 1968.

¹² Volbach 1976, pp. 83-84 no. 118, pl. 62; Volbach 1977, pp. 16, 30, fig. 17b.

¹³ See the entry of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in which the plaque is dated to around 800.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O92728/the-nativity-and-the-adoration-panel-unknown/>

one after the other without a long interval between them.¹⁴ These three ivories were made in a workshop active at an important city in the west part of the Empire, conceivably at Rome or Milan.¹⁵ The iconography of these ivories, spread through artists' sketchbooks or luxury objects, was adopted for two pyxes possibly carved in a Constantinopolitan workshop of the first half of the sixth century. The one pyx is today kept at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen (inv. no. 110), and illustrates, apart from the Nativity, the Adoration of the Shepherds and of the Magi¹⁶ (fig. 2), while the other is rather a copy of it and has been presented in the art trade quite recently.¹⁷ This cylindrical box has not yet been studied thoroughly, so it is mentioned herewith reservation. However, its relationship with the Rouen pyx and with another fragmentary pyx kept at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul¹⁸ is particularly close.



Figure 2

Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, ivory pyx, inv. no. 110, sixth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 20)

¹⁴ See Beckwith 1958 and Volbach 1976, no. 118, with the previous bibliography.

¹⁵ Volbach (1977, pp. 13-20, 24-30) argues in favor of an attribution to a workshop active in Ravenna, which seemshighly improbable.

¹⁶ Volbach 1976, p. 109 no. 173, pl. 87; Volbach 1977, pp. 16-17, 19, 30, 33, figs. 20a-b. Cat. Paris 1992, pp. 80-81 no. 31 (J. Durand).

¹⁷ *La gazette Drouot* 43 (4 Décembre 2020), Lot no 3 (cf. <https://www.gazette-drouot.com/en/lots/1963909>).

¹⁸ Volbach 1976, p. 109 no. 173a, pl. 88. Unfortunately, only the part of the pyx with the Adoration of the Magi is preserved; the missing part may have been adorned with a Nativity scene. Cf. Cat. Istanbul 1983, pp. 105-106 no.C.106; Cat. Istanbul 2010, pp. 203, 454 no. 101 (G.B. Çelik).

The second group comprises two central panels from five-part diptych leaves with the Virgin Mary enthroned holding the Christ-child on her lap and flanked by an angel and the three Magi. The one panel is kept at the British Museum, London¹⁹ (inv. no. 1904, 7-2, 1) (fig. 3), and the other at the John Rylands University Library, Manchester²⁰ (no. ivories 6). To the latter panel have been associated four other plaquettes, which are today dispersed at the Bode Museum, Berlin (inv. no. 2978), the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (inv. nos. III 300-301), and a private collection in Paris, showing the cross in a wreath elevated in the sky by angels, the Annunciation, Mary's Trial by Ordeal and the Voyage to Bethlehem, as well as two scenes from the life of St. Anna, the Annunciation and her dialog with Euthine, the maid²¹ The Nativity scene occupies the lower part of the central panels; on the Manchester piece



Figure 3

London, The British Museum, ivory panel, inv. no. 1904,7-2,1, sixth century (source: *Cat. Athens 2000*, p. 267 no. 3)

between the reclining Virgin and the manger with the Child in swaddling clothes surrounded by the animals and the star, a standing angel is addressed to the Virgin. He probably is the one who advised Salome to touch the divine child; she stands (on the Manchester panel) or kneels (on the London panel) extending her paralyzed hand to Jesus for healing. The kneeling Salome

¹⁹Volbach 1976, pp. 89-90 no. 131, pl. 68. Cf. also *Cat. New York 1979*, pp. 531-532 no. 476 (S.A. Boyd); *Cat. Athens 2000*, 266-267 no. 3 (A. Eastmond). *Cat. London 2008*, pp. 81, 383 no. 22 (A. Eastmond).

²⁰Volbach 1976, p. 88 no. 127, pl. 67; *Cat. New York 1979*, pp. 509-510 no. 457 (E. Lucchesi-Palli).

²¹Volbach 1976, pp. 88-89 nos. 126, 128, and 129, pls. 66-67; *Cat. New York 1979*, pp. 510-512 nos. 458-461 (E. Lucchesi-Palli, H.L. Kessler).

in front of the crib is found on a pyxis kept at Berlin (inv. no. 585),²² and on another one at the Museum of Art History, Vienna (inv. no. X42) which has been dated to the Carolingian period²³. The London and Manchester panels are thought to have been carved at Constantinople, Syria or the Holy Land at the same time or after the reconstruction and the redecoration of the Nativity basilica by Emperor Justinian.²⁴ According to later testimonies, the basilica of the Nativity received prior to 614 a mosaic decoration at the main cave and at the site of the manger,²⁵ as well as on the exterior of the west wall and perhaps on the east conch of the church; the latter included representations of the Nativity, the enthroned Virgin with the Christ-child, and the Adoration of the Magi.²⁶ Therefore, the ivory panels may have been inspired by the iconography of the monumental paintings of the Nativity church at Bethlehem, which, however, were recreated by mosaic workshops from Constantinople. We need only to remember here the case of the catholikon of the monastery at Sinai, the mosaic decoration of which is attributed to Constantinopolitan artists of the Justinianic period.²⁷

The third group consists of even more probable Constantinopolitan creations. The plaquette from the revetment of the Maximian's throne in Ravenna²⁸ (fig. 4), the five-part ivory cover of the Erevan Gospel,²⁹ and the pyx from Essen-Werden³⁰ (fig. 5) have specific iconographic and stylistic characteristics that in all probability stem from the art of the capital of the Empire. Two of the three works preserve a peculiar detail, an arched opening in the lower part of the manger, which could be a realistic feature of the crib in the very basilica of the Nativity at Bethlehem. This opening, which has the form of a window or *fenestella confessionis* with a rounded top, permitted sight and

²²Volbach 1976, p. 110 no. 1/4, pl. 88. Volbach 1977, 19, figs. 27a-b. See also Cat. New York 1979, pp. 497 no. 447 (A. St. Clair). Cat. Munich 2004, p. 268 no. 404 (G. Bühl).

²³ Volbach 1976, p. 120 no. 199, pl. 97.

²⁴ For the origins of the pyxes, cf. Cat. New York 1979, pp. 510-512 nos. 458-461 (E. Lucchesi-Palli, H.L. Kessler) and pp. 531-532 no. 476 (S.A. Boyd). For the partial rebuilding and redecoration of the Nativity church by Emperor Justinian, see Vincent and Abel 1914, pp. 32ff., 118-131, pl. II; Grabar 1946, vol. I, pp. 245-251, 326, and vol. II, p. 163, 175-177; and Wilkinson 2002, pp. 287-288. See recently Bacci et al. 2012 and Bacci 2017, pp. 59-95.

²⁵ Cf. the travelogue of Epiphanius in Grabar 1946, p. 163; Wilkinson 2002, p. 299 ch.11; Bacci 2017, p. 91.

²⁶ Cf. *Letter of the Three Patriarchs*, 7.8, ed. Munitiz, Chrysostomides, Harvalia-Crook, Dendrinis 1997, pp. 42-43 (comp. *ibid.*, pp. 26, 146); See also Bacci 2017, pp. 92-93.

²⁷Weitzmann 1966; Weitzmann 1971; Miziołek 1990; Andreopoulos (2002). For a thorough consideration of the mosaics of the sixth century, see recently James (2017), pp. 215-253.

²⁸ Volbach 1976, 93-94 no. 140, pl. 73; Volbach 1977, pp. 38ff., esp. 44, fig. 50; Rizzardi 2002, 145-150.

²⁹ Volbach 1976, pp. 94-95 no. 142, pl. 75.

³⁰ Volbach 1977, pp. 16-17, 19, 30, fig. 18; Cat. New York 1979, pp. 499-500 no. 449 (G. Vikan).



Figure 4.

Ravenna, Museo Arcivescovile, ivory revetment plaque, Maximian's throne, middle of the sixth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 50, detail)



Figure 5.

Essen-Werden, Schatzkammer St. Ludgerus, ivory pyx, sixth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 18)

accessibility to a relic or a number of relics kept inside (or underneath) the manger. This opening is found again on the Manchester panel, which is also placed in the latter half of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century.

My intuition is that the iconography of the panels and pyxes mentioned above is undoubtedly related to the decoration of the Nativity church at Bethlehem. The mosaic decoration of the cave and of the church as a whole offered visual and spiritual experiences to those pilgrims who had the determination and - chiefly - the means to make the long journey to the holy site where Jesus was born.³¹ Even if someone denies any relationship between the ivories bearing the representation of the Nativity and the decoration that could have existed in the Nativity church, there is some evidence that proves that there was a sort of a standard type of the Nativity scene in the Bethlehem basilica. The round clay *mementoes* that were distributed to pilgrims, a considerable number of which are kept at the British Museum (inv. no. 1973,0501.1-81)³², show the scene of the Nativity under three basic forms: either as a manger with the divine infant surrounded by the animals and the star, or as a manger with the infant and the animals under a baldachin, from which hangs an unquenchable lamp, or as a manger with Jesus, the animals and the star to the right of the Virgin, who is enthroned or leaning on a mattress. All three types are like frozen “snapshots” that do not have any trace of narrative and offer first-hand proof for the standardized, abbreviated, and simplified image that would have been treasured in the minds and hearts of pilgrims when back home. This image possibly mirrors the decoration of the church of the Nativity before the seventh century, for the same characteristics of the Nativity scene are present on ivories, on lead pilgrim ampullas like those which are kept at the Monza and Bobbio treasuries,³³ as well as on gold medallions, like the one of the two medallions from the region of Adana, now kept at the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul.³⁴ Finally, on the lid of the well-known box containing stones from the Holy Land, which is now kept in the treasury of the Vatican Sancta Sanctorum,³⁵ the same iconography is kept, although

³¹ On the terms of this journey to the Holy Land, see Hunt 1982; Maraval 1985; and Wilkison 2002. On the so-called “Palestinian” iconography, see Grabar 1946, 129-206 and *passim*; Weitzmann 1974; Kitzinger 1988; and Galavaris 2002, to cite only a few names of eminent scholars.

³² Camber 1981.

³³ The Nativity is shown in a roundel on the obverse of Monza ampulla no 2, and in similar roundels on Bobbio ampullas nos. 17, 18, and 19; Grabar 1958, pp. 19, 40-42, 52-53, pls. V, XLVI-XLVII, L.

³⁴ See recently Olsen Lam 2019, 46-51.

³⁵ Mietke 1998, figs. 27-28, no. 13 and Kessler 2014, pp. 97-108, figs. 14-16, with previous bibliography
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inverted, with the Virgin Mary on the left and Joseph on the right, but also with the well-known detail of the arched opening on the side of the manger.

In summary, the iconography of the Nativity on late antique ivories brings us on the one hand to the texts concerning the birth of the Lord, the canonical and the apocryphal, and on the other hand to Bethlehem, where the event of the birth took place in the cave and where the basilica of the Nativity above it became one of the most visited pilgrimage destinations. In the beginning, Western artists included the manger with the divine infant and the animals, the basic elements of the New Testament text in a narrative context with the Virgin, Joseph, the Magi and the shepherds around her. In the next phase, the scene acquired a dogmatic character, in which the Virgin, the divine infant and Salome had distinct and specific roles: thus, the virginity of the Mother of God was confirmed, any questioning was punished and the healing of the paralyzed hand of the skeptic sinner woman was the first miracle performed by Jesus. In the sixth century, the iconography of the Nativity became more compact and coherent: the Virgin Mary is depicted reclining in front of the manger that was put back to the second level, probably as it was depicted in the new basilica of the Nativity under Justinian. However, the scene of the Nativity did not yet acquire the first role, because the Adoration of the Magi had the lead; this will end when the Dodekaorton as a coherent entity will be established as the typical iconographic program of the byzantine churches during the middle byzantine period.

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