

Preceding the Ascetic Type: Earliest Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning

For late antique Christians, Mary personified Christian matronage in accordance with the full semantic breadth of Hebrew *ḥayil* or virtue, meaning “a force, whether of men, means or other resources,” that included able activity, valour or courage, commensurate goods and wealth, strength, might, and the power of valiantly trained hosts loyal to God.¹ This Hebrew term is relevant here because, as Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey have rightly noted, “Christianity emerged out of Jewish Communities ... with a powerful spirituality born of the Semitic tradition.”² Virtue encompassed much more in its meaning than mere chastity. The term embodied valiant courage in the face of adversity as well as bold excellence, industriousness, and material abundance. No other symbol from the late ancient world could equal the spindle and distaff in illustrating the capable attributes of virtue in images of the Mother of God, and no other symbol was as easily accessible within the quotidian routine and material culture of late antique Christian women. By imitating Mary whose task reflected their own, these early female believers recognized their own behaviors as distinctly powerful and valorous in sustaining Christianity within family life. Only under the growing influence of monastic asceticism and the codified rules established by the Church Councils of the fifth and sixth centuries did Mary’s virginal *chastity* come to narrowly define her virtue and describe holiness for Christian women; a definition that was nearly impossible to emulate and which undermined the sanctity of familial relationships.³

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- 1 James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible* (Madison, NJ: James Strong, 1890), 39. I am referencing Proverbs 31:10 and the translation of virtue according to the KJV. Other translations of *ḥayil* include: wife of noble character, capable wife, excellent woman, valiant woman, worthy woman or noted by strength of character. For the fullest definition and usage, cf. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. Botterweck and Ringgren, vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978), 348–355.
 - 2 Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Los Angeles; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 6.
 - 3 As early as the mid-fourth century, the Council of Gangra (AD 343) convened in Paphlagonia (Asia Minor) to stop the heretical ascetic practices that were creeping into the Church

The iconographic origins of the Virgin Annunciate spinning are consistent with the idealized Roman matron type as opposed to the inaccessible, semi-divine *Theotokos* type. God-bearer was a title that elevated Mary beyond lay accessibility and became central to the rhetorical codification of Orthodoxy by the fifth century. Scholars have argued that the Virgin of the pre-iconoclast era was characterised solely as theological proof of biology and honoured only for the attributes that she contributed to her Son, and that the post-iconoclast Virgin was revered for her emotive resonances as an empathetic, yet divine mother.⁴ I respectfully disagree with this assessment. While the most recent discussions of the spinning Annunciate are placed within the theological context of the exclusive virginal type,⁵ the exempla from late antiquity do not favour these same motifs as those historically associated with the ascetic denial of female sexuality or the subversion of traditional family structures. A close reading of proofs and evidences, including the earliest Annunciation scenes, reveals an iconography that privileges the virtuous matron type over the ascetic virgin⁶ as the female paragon of Christian piety and legitimacy. I

through the teachings of Eustathius of Sebaste and other founders of the ascetic movement. The findings of this council were mere bumps before the greater seismic shift wrought by ascetic practice in the years that followed. Canons from the council included:

- i. If anyone shall condemn marriage or abominate and condemn a woman who is a believer and devout and sleeps with her own husband, as though she could not enter the Kingdom of heaven, let him be anathema.
- x. If any one of those who are living a virgin life for the Lord's sake shall treat arrogantly the married, let him be anathema.
- xiv. If any woman shall forsake her husband, and resolve to depart from him because she abhors marriage, let her be anathema.
- xv. If anyone shall forsake his own children and shall not nurture them ..., under pretence of asceticism, let him be anathema.

Cf. *NPNF*² 14, 92–99.

- 4 Henry Maguire, "Body, Clothing, Metaphor: The Virgin in Early Byzantine Art," in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, eds. Leslie Brubaker and Mary Cunningham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 39–52.
- 5 Maria Evangelatou, "The Purple Thread of the Flesh," in *Icon and Word*, eds. Anthony Eastmond and Liz James (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 261–280. Cf. Henry Maguire, "The Self-Conscious Angel: Character Study in Byzantine Paintings of the Annunciation," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983): 377–391.
- 6 Averil Cameron states that the "impulse towards asceticism ... is generally put at the end of the third century" and that Mary was a model for that virginity. Averil Cameron, "The Early Cult of the Virgin," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan: Skira, 2000), 7. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press,