

The Matron

Aemilia Aeonias, Mother

Next I will sing of you, Aeonias, who gave me birth, in whom was mingled the blood of a mother from Tarbellae and of an Aeduan father. In you was found every virtue of a duteous wife, chastity renowned, hands busy spinning wool, truth to your bridal vows, pains to bring up your children: sedate were you yet friendly, sober yet bright. Now that forever you embrace your husband's peaceful shade, still cheer in death his tomb, as once in life you cheered his bed.¹



Ausonius' *Parentalia* poetically recalls ancient Latin epithets common to admirable wifely behaviour to describe the women of his family. Though he converted to Christianity, these fourth-century poems recall attributes typical of the idealized Roman matron to describe his mother, wife, sister, sister-in-law, and his nephew's wife. They repeat formulaic words of praise like *pudica*, *gravis*, and *lanificum manus* to describe their virtues and actions without any overt Christian sentiment. However, these epithets are not mere anecdotes established by an ancient moralist who insisted on keeping up traditional appearances without consideration for real-life sentiment toward those memorialized.² The virtues and characteristics used to memorialize Ausonius' female family members were deeply nuanced and symbolic. They signified power and status for married and marriageable women alike, and were ultimately chosen as defining traits for both deceased pagan and Christian women. These merits and virtues were combined with the idealized symbols of wool, spindle, and distaff and directed toward a visually literate audience. Whether these motifs were derived from women's own preferences and desires or from patriarchal imperative is largely unknowable. However, we must not disregard the possi-

1 Decimus Magnus Ausonius, *Parentalia* 11.iv, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn White (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), 61.

2 Riet Van Bremen, "Women and Wealth," in Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt, eds., *Images of Women in Antiquity* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1993), 223–242.

bility that late antique women appropriated these motifs as preferred iconography, identifying them as emblems of their own ritual and domestic tasks, and choosing them as potent symbols on objects that they wore and owned.³

One of the end purposes of the spinning Annunciate iconography was to underscore the aim of holy motherhood and the maintenance of family life as specific ideals common to fifth-century devotees. While many these fifth-century objects refer directly to daily life, fertility, and the spiritual nature of personal adornment, they also reflect the increased visibility and popularity to which Christianity, in general, became accustomed. Devotion to one's matronly role was considered sacrosanct during the fifth century and women wielded powerful influence by accepting this role as they moved between the varied phases of family life.

Marriage rings, fertility armbands, and pendants were popular objects representing the Christian matronly ideal and were also used to insure fecundity within marriage. This chapter includes a thorough examination of fifth-century Christian marriage, some consequences of bearing children, and the impetus to create spiritual sanctuaries within the household.⁴ Marriage could be a social and spiritual commitment that involved affection and the promise of eternal familial union, giving pause to the notion that married people were second-class citizens enduring the drudgery of daily living and unpleasant relationships.⁵

Early Byzantine marriage rings and amulets, though forming a relatively small corpus of material objects, provide us with compelling evidence of pre-Christian types and motifs integrated into popular Christian marriage iconography. The use of the Virgin Annunciate spinning as the sole iconography on three early Byzantine marriage rings overtly unites this tangible object with the classic virtues of matronly modesty, piety, and productivity. Nearly ten per-

3 Carolyn Connor, *Women of Byzantium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), ch. 5 *passim*. Connor has identified multiple examples of early Byzantine women as donors, sponsors, owners, and wearers of material objects. She acknowledges that although commissions by women can be impossible to ascertain, there are patterns of use and iconography, especially associated with things like jewellery, amulets, silks, and other objects of adornment that were sympathetic to women's interests, desires, and protection.

4 Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xi. Cooper's work on this topic presents ample and compelling evidence that "Christianization of marriage is a late Roman, not a medieval, problem," an argument brought to bear in the West during the fifth and sixth centuries. In addition, she argues favourably for the "evolving ideal of marriage" in Christian family life.

5 Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 13–15; 98–101.