



The Pagan Artemis in the Virgin Mary Salutation at Great Lavra, Mount Athos

Marco Merlini

A Holy Virgin on the male-only consecrated mountain

Mount Athos (*Agion Oros*) is the oldest and the last monastic state in the Christian Oriental world. A Post-Byzantine fresco of the XVI century from the most important monastery, the Great Lavra, depicts a very unusual Annunciation. Not a Christian saint or martyr but a pagan goddess, Artemis, attends at the fatal encounter between the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. In addition, the name and giant right ear of this Greek divinity—who is identified with wilderness, hunting and the moon—stands at the center of this depiction. This article contributes an interpretation of the enigma of the incorporation of a religious pagan element in the announcement to the Madonna of the incarnation of Jesus. Its aim is also to detect the ideological program subtended under this composition, and to remark on the iconographical and artistic essentials of the painter's great theological inspiration. Revealing several levels of meaning, I will accomplish the task by corroborating how this case study is a significant instance of pre-Christian roots in the pagan Greco-Roman civilization which, in turn, inherited several features of the divine in female form from the rich cultural traditions of the horticultural Neolithic "Old Europe" according to Marija Gimbutas' pioneering scholarship.

Even if the sacred Mountain is in northern Greece it is not Greek, but in another space and time. It is a long, thin rocky peninsula in the

shape of a mangled finger culminating in a massive pyramidal mountain of 2033 meters, projecting directly from a deep and stormy sea to the vertigo of heaven. This rugged area is physically separated from the rest of the world by a narrow isthmus, impassable walls and fences, an impenetrable forest, pristine streams and deep gorges (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The peninsula of Mount Athos from the sky.

Even with respect to international law, the Holy Mountain is a theocratic Christian Orthodox independent enclave. Greece guarantees its security by providing soldiers at the border and coastal surveillance. The small army has to reassure the "blacks angels," as the monks are called, against their apocalyptic nightmares concerning an even nowadays feared Turkish invasion, but also to avoid the chilling possibility of landing the enemy of enemies: representatives of the female gender. For the rest, *Agion Oros* enjoys complete autonomy and territorial sovereignty. Within it, each of the twenty monasteries is also endowed with autonomy and self-government, although they

remain subjected to the general rules of the Mountain. The monastic enclave is a theocratic self-governing Republic.



Figure 2: Mount Athos behind Stavronikita monastery.

The ‘world apart’ of Mount Athos was colonized by hermits in the early centuries of Christianity because isolation, inaccessibility, inhospitableness and holiness provided the ideal setting for those who cloister themselves. *Agion Oros* is inhabited at the present by about 1400-1600 monks who have withdrawn from the world, because they focus on the search for God through ascetic struggle, devotion and chastity. They are convinced that the divine magnet attracts, by its own will and initiative, human beings spending their lives in prayer and contemplation without any oversight, rerouting or derailment. Consequently, the ancient monastic tradition allows entrance to the enclave only to men. Several religious institutions prevent the presence of the opposite sex with varying degrees of rigor. The Christian Orthodox Republic of monks applies the prohibition against women in the most extensive way, banning them not only from each monastery but also from the entire peninsula¹ (Figure 2).

Article 186 of the Greek Constitution, voted in 1924, solemnly confirms the ancient interdiction for any female foot or paw (the

prohibition extends even to any female animal) to touch the ground of the Hellenic religious enclave. It specifies with messianic inspiration “as it has always been,” implying “and always will be.” Therefore, it confuses for a natural eternal condition a clause that began from an edict enacted in 1055 by the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos. A correction to this directive could only be decided upon by the resident monks themselves, who are not even considering any such innovation.²

The only woman authorized in the Christian Orthodox theocratic Republic is the Virgin Mary. Indeed, she is recognized as the actual and sole Mistress of the Holy Mountain, the Queen of the monastic community, the Ruler of each monastery, and the Owner of people and places. Athos’ tradition registers a series of miraculous episodes to evidence that she explicitly requires utter devotion by monks without distracting elements such as the presence of other women. The black angels identify themselves as custodians, executors and administrators of Virgin Mary’s authority and reciprocate her trust in them with worship full of love and attachment. They refuse to regard her as the First after the Only one. She is not the privileged intercessor and direct mediator of believers towards her Son. The monks do not invoke her as “St. Mary,” but as *Panagia* (All Holy, the holiest of the holies). They do not ask, “Most Holy Mother of God, intercede for us,” but directly “Most Holy Mother of God, save us!”

The Christian Orthodox Republic of monks exercises the ban on women literally. This not only applies to them in person but also extends to every feminine representation. The Mother of God is the only exception. Evoking the lost Garden of Eden, the monks state that Mount Athos is the privileged garden of *Panagia* and that her numerous images fill it as colorful flowers.

¹ Talbot 1996: 67.

² Iordanoglou 2005.



Figure 3: *Panagia of living water reflected on a building of the Great Lavra monastery.*

Any depiction of Virgin Mary corresponds to a personal name (sometimes more than one) whose origin is tied to a supernatural event, a special intervention in favor of a monastery or a member of the religious order. Monks and mere believers have undoubted faith in each of these miracles. However, the continuous and amazing miracles requested of images of the Virgin Mary attract pilgrims in large numbers. Monks live in daily, direct and intimate contact with the icons of God's Mother. It is as if they live in such an exclusive relationship and unique dependence with this "special" woman, through her representations, that they are unable to imagine any kind of emotional connection with any "normal" woman (Figure 3).

Occasionally, female saints appear in the frescoes on walls of churches or refectories. However, they should be martyrs sharing the Passion of Christ, or sibyls prophesying the

Messiah. The exuberant and colorful young ladies dancing on the drum of the cupola in the chapel of Koukouzelissa are a pleasant and sometimes deprecated exception.

Within such a scenario of restricted interdiction of any feminine image, how can the presence of the pagan goddess, Artemis, be explained, according to a pious Athonite tradition,³ as one of the characters appearing in the Annunciation painted from 1535 to 1541⁴ above the main entrance of the refectory of the oldest and most important monastery, the Great Lavra?⁵ In addition, her name stands in the center of the proclamation of the virginal conception of Jesus (Figure 4).



Figure 4: *The facade of the refectory of the Great Lavra monastery.*

An ancient Greek marble plaque with a votive inscription and a huge human ear in high relief has been embedded above the window under the gables formed by the roof. It can be dated to the classical period, say around the V-IV century BCE. The connected inscription recites, "Neuris offered this to Artemis Agrotera (or Hagratera, *Ἀγροτερη*)."⁶ *Agrotera* (The Wild-one) is the form of the goddess as the

³ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19-20; Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1973.

⁴ Chatzidakis 1963, 1982, 1986: 39.

⁵ Smyrnakis 1903: 391.

⁶ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19.

protectress and ruler of hunting and the rustic wild. Austere Cretan monk-painters (most probably the famous Theophanes Strelitzas Bathas and sons) represented the Annunciation under this pagan votive offering⁷ (Figure 5).

⁷ Theophanes the Cretan (Theophanes Strelitzas known as Bathas) was born at Heraklion/Iraklion in Crete and lived between the last decade of the XV century and his death in 1559. He was a highly productive artist and in great demand. Theophanes was the central interpreter of the Cretan School and his works became a model for coeval and subsequent painting (D'Antiga 2007: 103). He went to Mount Athos with his two sons and co-workers (Symeon and Neophytos), possibly after the death of his wife. At the Holy Mountain, in 1536, he became monk of the Great Lavra monastery. The monk-painter family, under Theophanes' the talented direction, frescoed the main church and refectory of their monastery from 1535 to 1541, when the "master" was probably between 40 and 50. Subsequently, Theophanes and Symeon painted the main church and refectory of Stavronikita monastery. The wall paintings in the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in Stavronikita are also attributed to them. Theophanes was a sincere and intense agent of the Orthodox religion and the primacy of *Agion Oros* within it, as evidenced by his decision in mature age to become a monk and settle in the remote monastic enclave of Mount Athos, imposing the same spiritual way of life on his two children (Chatzidakis 1986: 41). His frescoes are ascetic, austere, restrained, and linear traditional Byzantine compositions. They are described by a consistent organisation of the representation that exalts an anthropocentric approach (Chatzidakis 1986: 108). Figures are portrayed with elegant posture, great gravity, noble bearing, controlled manifestations of emotions, and calm and mitigated gesture (Millet 1916). Conspicuous dramaticism and prosaicism would be indecorous. Dark faces are only in part illuminated by direct light, and drapery is depicted rigid with only few bright lines. Colors are dark and often gloomy; the background around the characters is manly blackish. Theophanes' work is more conscious of visual perspective than older Byzantine artists. However, he does not use schemes and effects of geometrical perspective that had become standard in the West (Chatzidakis 1963; Valentini 1964: 203; Gouma-Peterson 1983). Theophanes also painted a series of panel icons for iconostases and small portable works. Outstanding examples of his iconography survive in the monasteries of Great Lavra, Stavronikita, Iviron, Pantokrator, and Gregoriou. Chronologically, the millenarian story of the Athonite portable icons can be divided into three periods. The second period (1535–1711) starts with the arrival of Theophanes on the Holy Mountain and ends with the emergence of Dionysios from Fourná, who promoted the



Figure 5: Ancient Greek votive relief and dedicatory inscription embedded in the wall at the center of the Annunciation.

At the peak of his career in the mid-XVI century, Theophanes was the leading exponent of the Post-Byzantine Cretan School and the most important figure in Greek wall painting of the period. In the foundation inscription of the Great Lavra written by the patron, he is named as "Sire (*kyr*) Theophanes the monk." In the same century, it happened only to Domenikos Theotocopoulos (El Greco). In the entries relating to him in the Codex 18 of the Great Lavra, he is recorded *sic et simpliciter* as "the master Theophanes" (*didaskalos*).⁸ In order to explain significance of this amazing Annunciation, we need to pursue as main line of investigation the beliefs and mentality of monk-painters of the Post-Byzantine Orthodox Church in the XVI century. We have, for example, to comprehend their vision concerning Artemis as a "demon." We have also to deal with the syncretic polytheism of popular religion that inherited by the late Roman period the substantial unity among Greek Artemis,

return to the techniques of the Macedonian School. Almost all the Athonite monasteries possess icons of the Cretan School. Despite the success in *Agion Oros*, the masterly hagiographer returned home to Crete before his death on 24 February 1559, the day he prepared his testament (Chatzidakis 1982, 1986).

⁸ Chatzidakis 1986: 38.

Ephesian Artemis, Diana, and Isis.⁹ Alongside with the Annunciation, Theophanes and family portrayed ancient Greek philosophers on the internal walls of the refectory. As I will corroborate, Artemis as well as Plato, Aristotle, Solon, and others are significant instances of the submerged continuity between Christianity and the pagan Greek civilization rooted into the Neolithic Danube civilization.

The Annunciation is one of the founding events of the Christian Church, even if Luke's narrative is the sole scriptural source for Mary's crucial experience with the Word. It is also one of the major feasts in the Byzantine liturgy. The *Evangelismos* or *Salutation*¹⁰ of the *Theotókos* (The Mother of God), as it is known in the Greek tradition, is celebrated on 25th of March, exactly nine months before Christmas and coinciding with the fifth day after the coming of spring, the Vernal equinox. It was the cosmic day when, according to the Bible, God populated waters and skies. In ancient peasant calendar, it was Earth Mother "nameday." She was pregnant and thus she had to be protected avoiding to strike the soil, or to spit, dig holes, or plough.¹¹ This Feast originally commemorated the Incarnation of Christ. However, with the increasing awareness of the role played by his Mother in the Divine Economy, the celebration took on a distinctly Marian nature.¹² We have evidence of it in Constantinople since the middle of the V century.¹³ Greece memorializes the independence on the same

day. The next day, March 26, the archangel Gabriel is celebrated. In Orthodox churches, the scene of the Annunciation often occupies the two central door leaves of the iconostasis which isolate the *sancta sanctorum* from the main section of the building for public worship. The strategic position has a twofold symbolic meaning. On the one hand, it marks the passage into the inner sanctuary as the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh, i.e., it indicates his entry in humanity and that of humanity into a new life. On the other hand, the mariological scene with the encounter with the archangel is the starting point and the basis of a series of images / events rising in column on the iconostasis to the top of it, where the glory of Christ Pantocrator is portrayed.



Figure 6: The Annunciation frescoed above the main entrance of the refectory.

The Annunciation frescoed on the façade of the refectory of the Great Lavra is divided into two scenes (Figure 6). On the left, the archangel Gabriel is stretching out the right hand toward the Virgin, while the other hand holds a long stick with a cross at the top. A very young Mother of God is gazing him with surprise. On the right of the composition, an equally young woman is caught in the act of leaving. She is the Greek goddess Artemis who is retreating while Mary assumes the center stage, according to monks' pious tradition.¹⁴ The heavenly messenger has suddenly arrived at the end of a dialogue between the two women.

⁹ Agrippina the Younger (Nero's mother, the fourth wife of Emperor Claudius) was assimilated in her lifetime with Diana/Artemis, Caere/Demeter, Fortuna, Luna/Selene, Isis, Juno/Hera, Cybele, Securitas, and Venus/Aphrodite (Mikocki 1995: 38-42).

¹⁰ Salutation takes name from "Hail," the greeting of the archangel Gabriel to Virgin Mary at the Annunciation.

¹¹ Moszyński 1934, vol. 2: 510; Gimbutas 1987: 24.

¹² Charalampidis 2007: 26. It is one of the numerous cases in which the liturgical tradition preceded the literary setting.

¹³ The homilies written by Patriarch Proclus of Constantinople and Peter Chrysologos are the earliest records of this celebration. See remarks in Essey 1973: 40.

¹⁴ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19-20; Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1973: 33-34.

What did they converse about? The interesting thing is that we know it, as we shall see.

The Ear of a Goddess who is ready to listen

The marble plaque with a votive inscription to Artemis surmounted by the relief of a human ear is not elsewhere the described Annunciation, but is located in the central position of it. It is not a mere ornamental element, despite its perfect decorative quality. Its meaning should be an integral constituent of the divine event. The understanding of the role played by an ancient pre-Christian goddess in Gabriel's announcement to Virgin Mary requires an additional effort starting from the comprehension of the thought process and beliefs of Christian oriental artist-monks who were active in the mid-XVI century. They concern the features shared by Artemis and the Mother of God and in why they considered the former as the legitimate precursor of the second.¹⁵

A parallelism hinged on the non-opposition between virginity and motherhood is immediately evidenced by monks I have interviewed at Mount Athos.¹⁶ In ancient Greece, Artemis was the virgin goddess par excellence. As the patroness of the woodlands, she sets herself implacably caste, indifferent to carnal love and against wedlock. Nonetheless, her help was invoked by parturients, because she did not cause any pain to her mother Leto at the time of delivery and, still in infancy, she helped her in the long and painful labor to give birth to the twin Apollo.¹⁷ We will deal in a subsequent paragraph with Artemis in the form of the Minoan Eileithyia as divinity in charge to help women with birthing and with

gynaecological problems.¹⁸ The Aegean pre-Greek childbirth goddess is nearer to the Anatolian Mother Goddesses and is conceived differently from the Aryan Ge Meter.¹⁹

In a society where motherhood was strictly connected to fertility but not necessarily to love and sexual desire, Artemis role in relation to female biology and the reproduction was not restricted to giving birth. At the heart of mystic rituals centered on the divine feminine, Artemis regulated also the sexual initiation²⁰ and behavior of women.²¹ Greek women acquired status and honour frequently with marriage and motherhood. So Artemis' task in preparing maidens for this role was very important.²² This goddess of the untouched nature is a virgin in most versions, but the legendary Lycian poet Olen and the Achaeans celebrate her aspect of Eileithyia as mother of Eros, the divine quintessence of love.²³ Strabo calls her Great Mother despite confirming her virginity.²⁴

Finally, Artemis ripe for motherhood is attested by a fertility goddess from Asia Minor with her main cult centre at the city of Ephesus. If the pagan goddess is commonly associated with maidenhood, the later cult image of Ephesian Artemis portrays her with many globe-like appendages as breasts.²⁵ At the present, alternative identifications for this pectoral have been advanced.²⁶ However, it has to be underlined for our study that they were certainly understood that way by III and IV century Christian writers, reflecting Artemis ability to

¹⁵ Lewandowski 2006: 236.

¹⁶ The present article is the result, not only of pilgrimages to specialized libraries, but also of participant observation, interviews and conversations with monks residing on Mount Athos. They have been carried out during four visits to the Holy Mountain and in related monastic settings during the period 2010-2011.

¹⁷ Callimachus, *Hymn 3 to Artemis* 1921: 1 ff.

¹⁸ Gimbutas 1989: 109.

¹⁹ Price 1978: 7.

²⁰ Burkert 1985: 151.

²¹ Lewandowski 2006: 236.

²² Strelan 1996: 120.

²³ Pausanias 1979: 8.21.3 on Arcadia; Larson 2007.

²⁴ Golan 2003: 430.

²⁵ Koester 1995: 95.

²⁶ Similar "breasts" appear on a statue depicting Zeus Labraundos from Anatolia, falsifying the theory of the many-breasted goddess. For a discussion concerning alternative understanding of these protuberances in Artemis portrays, see Thomas 1995: 86-7; Larson 2007: 110.

nurture.²⁷ The Goddess was said to be, among other attributes, the mother and ruler of everything.²⁸ Through her “nutrient breasts that overflow with sustaining milk,”²⁹ she was worshipped as the legitimate wife of the city, sustainer of its inhabitants, preserver of family, protector of political agencies, and guarantor of the universe’s stability.³⁰ This is why the Goddess was worshipped by virgins, celibate priestesses and married women without any paradox. Her veneration was practiced as far more ancient than the arrival of Greek colonists³¹ around 1000 BCE,³² who assimilated a local Earth Goddess with their own Hellenic Artemis.³³ The name Ephesus itself appeared as etymological descendant of the Hittite town Apasa, which occupied the site in the Bronze Age.³⁴ Local mythology went even deeper in time associating the Ephesian Artemis to a divine fertile woman born about 7000 BCE.³⁵

Ardent devotees of the Ephesian Artemis were the Amazons who are said to have kept only their female children, who were brought up to emulate Artemis *Agrotera* in hunting and their own mothers in pursuing warfare.³⁶ The cultural contradictions motherhood-love and fertility-eros were made manifest through the antithesis virginity-maternity embodied by Artemis, who was worshipped at the same time as a virgin and generator without any paradox. Eliade notes that the coexistence of these conflicting elements has been a key mystery of the identity of this goddess.³⁷ According to Rafal Lewandowski, the multitude of frequently contradictory features of Artemis reflect a

multitude of female archaic deities as refined by Greek religious mind.³⁸

Frescoing his Annunciation, the monk-painter Theophanes recognized the similarity between Artemis (personification of the contrast virginity-motherhood fused into the concept of a single goddess),³⁹ and Mary (both Virgin and Mother of the Son of God) and that this bi-mystical opposition in Artemis is a prefiguration of the virginal birth to the Son of God by the *Theotókos*. The convergence between these two paradoxical goddesses is even more significant because the Christian Orthodox Church is resolute asserting that Mary “conceived as a virgin, brought forth as a virgin, and after the birth still remained a virgin,”⁴⁰ as prophesized by Isaiah (7, 14).⁴¹ If the perpetual virginity of Mary is still not conclusively settled in the related theology due to an inconsistency between doctrinal denotation and Liturgical practice, which in Christianity has always anticipated the former with reference to the Mother of God, it is attested strongly and insistently by the black angels of Mount Athos.⁴²

In the ideological program of the Cretan painter and his monastic customers, the Annunciation plays a special role in *Agion Oros* being the doctrine of the permanent virginity of

²⁷ Li Donnici 1992: 392.

²⁸ Evans and Porter 2000: 318.

²⁹ Li Donnici 1992: 408, 411.

³⁰ Ibid.: 394.

³¹ Pausania 7.2.6.

³² Larson 2007: 109.

³³ Leibovici 1993.

³⁴ Larson 2007: 109.

³⁵ Evans and Porter 2000: 318.

³⁶ Pausania 7.2.4; Witt 1997: 141.

³⁷ Eliade 1978: 196.

³⁸ Lewandowski 2006: 236.

³⁹ Gimbutas 1974: 198.

⁴⁰ Constan 1929: Article 3.

⁴¹ It is based on a misunderstood of the term *almàh* in the Isaiah passage of the Hebraic Bible. It literally means ‘virgin’ in the sense of a youthful woman, translated as ‘physically virgin’ (Augias and Pesce 2006: 89).

⁴² The Protosbyter John Meyendorff (1979: 165), Dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary, maintains that “the only doctrinal definition on Mary to which the Byzantine Church was formally committed in the decree of the Council of Ephesus which called her the *Theotókos*.” However, Kallistos Ware, born Timothy Ware, bishop within the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate and well known Eastern Orthodox academic, asserts that the title Ever-Virgin has a dogmatic standing due to Liturgical practice, “In Orthodox services Mary... is usually given her full title: ‘Our All-Holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorified Lady, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary’” (Ware 1963: 257).

Mary, necessary requirement for the sinlessness of Jesus, an appropriate role model for the Athonite asceticism. Monks are aware that the Church has taken the notion of the virginal conception and nativity of a God from ancient myths⁴³ that were part of the surrounding pagan religions when Christianity appeared.⁴⁴

In ancient Egypt mythology, Horus was the parthenogenetic child of the Virgin Mother, Isis. Statues of this Egyptian divine Creatrix and Infant in her arms were common in Egypt and were exported up to remote countries. In the sepulchral art of Rome, black statues of the goddess Isis with Horus still survive in catacombs from early Christianity after their conversion into the representation of Virgin Mary and Jesus.⁴⁵ When the pagan religion was absorbed by the Christian Church, the Roman Feast of Isis and the Lupercalia became the Nativity. Neith, the Egyptian Sky Goddess of Sais, was said to have generated herself and as a virgin another god, Ra (the Sun). The cult of Neith was diffused among women. The school at Sais was open only to women, who reiterated the obstetrical action of Isis-Neith, carrying the newborn in her arms.⁴⁶ Reputed a divine obstetric, often depicted with a bow and arrows and associated with bees,⁴⁷ Neith is comparable to Artemis.⁴⁸ Even Apis, the sacred bull of Memphis, was believed to have been begotten by a deity descending as a ray of moonlight on the cow that was to become the mother of the sacred beast; hence, Apis was regarded as the son of the god.⁴⁹

Coherently with their claimed heavenly origins, the pharaohs assured to be the divine

offspring of the god's intercourse with their mothers. About two thousand years before the Christian era, *Mut-em-ua*, the virgin Queen of Egypt, was said to have given birth to the Pharaoh Amenkept (Amenophis) III without the fatherhood. The event was represented on the walls of the temple of Luxor according to a *schemata* that was precisely applied by Christianity. The god Thoth (Tat, That)⁵⁰ announces to the Virgin-Queen that she is about to be pregnant. The ram-headed god Kneph (the Holy Spirit) mystically impregnates her by holding a cross, the symbol of life, to her mouth. The Virgin-Queen gives birth to a Man-God helped by nurses. The newly born infant is enthroned to be honored by gods and adored by humans, including three kneeling kings who offer him gifts.⁵¹

Myths concerning maidens able to conceive from a holy spirit without any sexual contact were not limited to ancient Egypt. At the time when Christianity arose, several gods from virgin-mothers were worshipped in various regions of the Roman Empire. The adherents of Zarathustra believed that he had been born by an untouched woman. Attis, the Phrygian god, was indicated as the son of the virgin Nana. It was enough the act of putting in her bosom a ripe almond or pomegranate. In one version of Greek mythology, Dionysus is the son of Zeus out of the virgin goddess Persephone. Also a number of heroes or heroines resulted by non-ordinary birth of virgins. Jason, who was murdered by Zeus, was said to have been another son of the virgin Persephone, and to have had no father, either human or divine. Perseus was also said to be virgin-born. Even during the lifetime of the Alexander the Great people were led to believe that he was conceived by the mother Olympias through an intercourse with Zeus.⁵² In Roman mythology, Romulus was mentioned to be born by a virginal Vestal who conceived him through a supernatural sexual relations with the god

⁴³ Eliade 1987: 273.

⁴⁴ Rhys 2003: 114.

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 115.

⁴⁶ Gazzaniga and Serarcangeli 2000: 40.

⁴⁷ Kasyan 2010: 6.

⁴⁸ Herodotus and others regarded Neith as identical with Athena, and Bast with Artemis. This attribute of Athena may have been attached to her first in Asia Minor from contact with the Thraco-Phrygian Artemis cult (Macurdy 1912).

⁴⁹ Wiedemann 1897: 187 ff.

⁵⁰ He was the messenger of the gods and also their scribe.

⁵¹ Vail 1995: 39; Rhys 2003: 114.

⁵² Levine, Allison, and Crossan 2006: 82; O'Collins 2008.

Mars. Denouncing the pagan mythical roots of the virginal conception, Jewish were critics of the early Christian movement rejecting Mary's maidenhood as a case of illegitimacy. In Jeffrey Archer's and Francis Maloney's *The Gospel According to Judas*, the first century Judas discharges the virginal conception of Jesus as no more than a further example of Greek myths narrating heavenly gods who produce offspring following a union with pure and chaste women on Earth.⁵³

Virginal birth implying lovemaking with a divinity, attested in ancient mythology, gave a halo of sanctity cast in the explanation of the arrival of god's son upon earth in human guise. Therefore, the miraculous virginity of Jesus' mother is not exceptional.⁵⁴ The "Fathers of the Church," such as Justin Martyr (103–165) in the *Dialogue with trypho*, stigmatized the numerous pre-Christian virgin birth stories as inventions of the Devil who, knowing that Christ would subsequently be born of a virgin, counterfeited the miracle before it really took place.⁵⁵ However, myths of virgin births may have been originated from belief much deeper in time that the world was created by a single female primordial being; if it was on its own, no sexual act could have preceded birth. The conception was parthenogenetic.⁵⁶

Dealing with the challenge to represent how Virgin Mary gave miraculously birth to the Holy One, the monk-painter Theophanes did not dismiss the ancient Greek myths, but creatively exploited the dedication to Artemis *Agrotera* in a way that, as we explore below, recognizes in her the forerunner of the *Theotókos*. Some epigraphists parallel this votive plate to an incomplete inscription recovered from a private house at Beroea (Macedonia, Greece). It was

incised on a marble slab probably around the second century BCE and accompanied below with silhouettes of the soles of two right feet. This is a thank-offering formula for a cure,⁵⁷ probably related to the cult of Asklepios.⁵⁸

However, at *Akte* (as Mount Athos was called in antiquity) Neuris did not offer the inscription and ear in marble in return for the cure of a disease. A feeling different from healing had prompted the dedication, because the enormous ear is not human and Neuris was possibly a reverent priestess consecrated to Artemis.⁵⁹ Concerning the dedicator, *Neuris* in ancient Greek is a deerskin, such as the deer pelt that clothed the statue of Artemis at her temple of Despoina in Arcadia.⁶⁰ Therefore, it has been inferred that Neuris was a priestess of Artemis. Concerning the inscription, according to the interpretative grid elaborated by Margherita Guarducci, it is a typical votive tablet with dedication composed of the name of the petitioner, the verb denoting the action of dedicating, and the offering plus the name of the goddess in the dative case.⁶¹ In these instances, the presence of an ear signifies that the god to

⁵³ Archer and Maloney 2007.

⁵⁴ Golan 2003: 406.

⁵⁵ Marcovich 1997; Bullock 1998. The *Dialogue with Trypho* is also an online text translated in English by Roberts-Donaldson at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html>.

⁵⁶ Golan 2003: 406.

⁵⁷ Woodward 1911/1912: 151. Other representations of the sole of the foot as *ex-voto* are from Thera (Rouse 1902: 210 ff.), and the votive sandal on a relief is from the Asklepieion in Athens (British School at Athens 1904–1905:146 ff.).

⁵⁸ Some votive tributes in sanctuaries, especially those dedicated to the divinities of healing, are *ex-votos* donated by grateful patients after the cure of an illness. They are frequently associated with representations of parts of the body that have been restored to health (eyes, tongues, ears, hands, feet, hearts, etc.). Sometimes the cured testify their gratitude by a hymn to the healing divinity. In other instances, the donation of a relief followed a sacrifice offered to the divinity inducing it to prevent a specific disease or in general to guarantee healthiness to the dedicator. It is the case of silver representations of ears offered up to Minerva, the protectress of the head, and at the present held at the Dome of Milan (Keyssler 1756: 315). They are associated with prayers to the goddess aimed to activate her healing powers.

⁵⁹ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19.

⁶⁰ Pausanias 1979: 8.37.4 on Arcadia; Otto 1955: 85; Gimbutas 1974:198; Gimbutas and R. Dexter 1999: 156.

⁶¹ Guarducci 1974: 8.

which the plaque is offered has the quality of *Epekoos* ('one who listens carefully and protectively').⁶²

The offering from the priestess Neuris of a votive inscription connected to an ear representing Artemis divine epithet of *Epekoos* is indicative, because it recognizes the Goddess—patroness of childbirth and life, and therefore ruler of reproductive human fate—within the restricted group of divinities disposed to listen to the supplications from humanity.⁶³ "Artemis, . . . give ear to my prayers and ward off the evil Keres!"⁶⁴ For you, Goddess, this is a small thing, but for me it is critical," Theognis implores through a Greek elegy of c. VI BCE.⁶⁵

Ephesian Artemis was venerated as a personal rescuer and helper who heard prayers.⁶⁶ Known as early as the IV century BCE, the *Ephesia Grammata* were six magical letters incised around feet, girdle and crown of her cultic statue and applied to magical spells. As the *Ephesia Grammata* were written onto the Goddess image, her potency was given to them. After studying the magical formula, Arnold concludes that in many instances there is slight or no difference between calling on Artemis to accomplish a certain task or utilizing a spoken or written charm.⁶⁷ Artemis ability to listen was strictly connected to her role of savior in situations of transition and in danger. Frequently she is shown as standing in a doorway suggesting her assistance across thresholds.⁶⁸

In Greek-Roman religious setting, the attribute of *Epekoos* was sometimes expressed not through wording, but directly with the representation of the divine ear/ears. Incised or painted on walls, altars, and votive plaques in pagan temples and sanctuaries, ears indicated prayers that had to be listened or that had been

answered by the related divinity.⁶⁹ The representation of ears consecrated to a divinity showed its attentive listening to prayers of mortals and guaranteed its constant favor and positive response.⁷⁰ A dedication to Artemis

⁶⁹ Forstner 1977: 350.

⁷⁰ Some examples make clear the typology. A bronze plaque with two ears in relief bears an inscription in a *tabula ansata* of unknown provenance. The dedication to Zeus Olybris associates them to the god's quality of *Epekoos* (Isaac 1997). A marble stele of the II century BCE with a carved representation of two human ears with a double-axe in the middle was recovered at Güzelpinar, near the ancient Greco-Roman city of Hierapolis (southwestern Turkey). It was dedicated to Apollon Kareios in fulfillment of a vow (Ceylan and Ritti 1997). At Pompeii, a similar ear was consecrated to Dionysus in the first century CE. Concerning the divinities to whom the ears were addressed, it is signaled on the dedication. At Delos, the divinities who received votive ears having the epithet of *Epekoos* were mostly eastern (Hamilton 2000). However, as in ancient Egypt some plaques featured ears only to amplify petitions to any deity (Lloyd 2010: 517). In the Hellenistic period, the dedicatory reliefs with representations of pairs of ears to allude to the attribute of *Epekoos* associated with the goddess Isis, considered akin to Artemis by popular religiosity, became popular under Egyptian influence. In the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, the exhausted Lucius expresses an invocation of praise to the "Regina caeli" (11.2), identified as Isis, and the goddess hears his supplication (Finkelpearl 1998; 2003). Isis listens attentively also the prayer of her priestess in the *Life of Aesop* "for a report of piety swiftly reaches the ears of the gods" (VA 5 in Paschalis 2007: 43). Three votive plaques (ns. 49, 50, and 51) consecrated to Isis bear representations of ears as probable attestation for her divine manifestation. The first is dedicated to Isis *Epekoos*. The second has no inscription. The third is offered to Isis after the goddess hearing of the prayer (Despinis, Stefanidou Tiveriou and Voutiras 1997). The plaques are from the I century CE, were found in the Serapeion of Thessaloniki, and are at the present held in the Museum of Archaeology in Thessaloniki. Several other dedications from Thessaloniki are addressed to Isis *Epekoos*. One is associated with their presentation of an ear (Despinis, Stefanidou Tiveriou and Voutiras 2003). Two inscribed reliefs of this typology were recovered in the sanctuary of Sarapis and Osiris at Kanopos, where Isis was also worshipped. They are ascribed to the II century CE. The first relief was consecrated by a freedman to Isis; the other by a person called Arrian, probably to Osiris (Kayser 1992). The Athenian Epaphroditus dedicated ears to Isis (Witt 1971: 303-4).

⁶² Ibid.: 67.

⁶³ Ibid.: 68

⁶⁴ The Keres were female spirits (*daimones*) of violent or cruel death.

⁶⁵ Theognis, Fragment 1.11 in Gerber 1999.

⁶⁶ Strelan 1996: 51.

⁶⁷ Arnold 1989: 15.

⁶⁸ Strelan 1996, 51.

Lochia associated to the image of a pair of ears was found on a stele at Karyochori Kozanis (northern Greece). It belongs to the Roman Imperial period. The ears are described to trigger the goddess hearing prayers.⁷¹ Similar tributes / homage to the manifestation of gods by using the rhetorical figure of the part for the whole (an anatomical element for the entire body/personality), which should not be regarded as anatomical votives in the cure of particular diseases,⁷² are not infrequent in antiquity.⁷³

The classical Greek marble ear that was eradicated from a pagan sanctuary to be positioned nearly two millennia later on the facade of the refectory of the Great Lavra is not human, but is the right ear of the goddess Artemis. It was perforated in ancient times to recreate the auditory canal facilitating communication. The reproduction of this anatomical part possibly designates the request to the goddess to listen with attention, empathy and discernment. Alternatively, it may testify that the goddess has responded favorably to prayers.⁷⁴ However, they were not necessarily connected with divine healing of hearing and the huge ear is not an attestation for such a grace received (Figure 7). For settling the interpretation of Theophanes' Annunciation, it is significant to note not only the belonging of the marble ear to Artemis, but also that the Cretan painter was aware of this attribution and recycled it according to this conviction.



Figure 7: Relationship between Virgin Mary and goddess Artemis.

If the priestess Neuris offered a large votive ear sculptured in marble invoking the favor of the Goddess who listens attentively, Theophanes had at his disposal several references to “the ear of God” in the Holy Scriptures to symbolize divine wisdom and kindness in response to the prayers of the faithful. To avoid the terms *Epakouō* and *Epekoos*, commonly used in Hellenism for hearing deities, Christians utilized *Akouein* and the more common *Eisakouō* referring to God’s hearing of prayers.⁷⁵ The main target of devotion is the very ear of God, and Isaiah assures it “is not too hard to hear.”⁷⁶ Lament, cry of despair and weeping arose from the lips of Hagar, Abraham’s servant and secondary wife who was thrown into the wilderness with her son Ishmael. When the bread and water was finished, she took a seat away from her exhausted child not to see him die. “Then she saw face to face the Angel of God. And the Lord brought back her son.”⁷⁷

The Scriptures also record inadmissible requests for the ear of God, such as Abel’s blood screams to God, wetting the soil. It is the cry of the innocent victim calling for revenge, but God places a mark of protection on Cain. If

⁷¹ Karamitrou-Mentesidi 1997.

⁷² Forsen 1996: 9-27.

⁷³ The aforementioned Serapeion of Thessaloniki also yielded a votive plaque from the first century CE with footprints dedicated to Isis and Sarapis, symbolic of their divine apparition and permanent presence to the worshippers (Despinis, Stefanidou Tiveriou, and Voutiras 1997).

⁷⁴ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19-20; Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1973: 33-34.

⁷⁵ Bromiley 1985: 35.

⁷⁶ Isaia 59 :1 in *La Sacra Bibbia* 2008.

⁷⁷ Genesis 21:18, 19 in *La Sacra Bibbia* 2008.

the deity is on the side of Abel, nevertheless it defends Cain from retaliation.⁷⁸ An Athonite monk recalled maliciously to me that, according to the apo-cryphal *Acts of John* (40–42) supposed to be written by John the Evangelist, the collapse of the temple consecrated to Artemis at Ephesus was the result of God's listening to a prayer from his worshippers. Human beings, in turn of the benevolent hearing of their Maker, must listen to his voice,⁷⁹ giving attention to his words and understanding his commandments.⁸⁰ God's response to invocations presupposes the obedience to him of the creatures he has created.⁸¹

According to a popular theology, eyesight tends to reduce the human being to an object (looked at), while hearing more easily perceives a subject (listened to). The eye of God, even if omniscient, bases itself on exteriority of the believer, tending to define features and establish boundaries from an external perception. Divine listening engages an inwardness. Viewing captures what is visually apparent, whereas listening resonates with what belongs to the self and has deep meaning.⁸²

On *Agion Oros*, the counterpart of Artemis *Epekoos* is *Panagia Gorgo Epekoos* ("She who is quick to hear"), whose wonder-working icon has been venerated in Dochiariou monastery since 1664. The Athonite tradition narrates that the sacred image miraculously healed a blind monk that she had deprived of sight some years before, because he had not paid enough attention to his orders. During the healing process, a voice was heard from the icon explaining she was the guardian of monks. They should apply to her for all their needs and she would hear them speedily, for her name is *Gorgo Epekoos*. This miracle and the promise of the Marian representation became rapidly

⁷⁸ Genesis 4 in *La Sacra Bibbia* 2008.

⁷⁹ Psalm 45, 11 in *La Sacra Bibbia* 2008.

⁸⁰ *The Book of Proverbs* in the Hebrew Bible 4:20, 22; *Exodus* 15:26.

⁸¹ Forstner 1977: 350.

⁸² Murray 1994.

known to the entire Holy Mountain attracting, still nowadays, many sick pilgrims praying for a cure. At Mount Athos, Virgin Mary has replaced Artemis as the female divinity who hears the supplications of monks and pilgrims.

The story from Dochiariou monastery illustrates well the direct derivation of the Christian Madonna from the ambivalent ancient goddesses who were mistresses of life and death,⁸³ givers of the correct rules and punishers of the undisciplined. This is a third bridge between Artemis and Virgin Mary and the third recognition from Theophanes of the Greek goddess as the precursor of the *Theotókos*. I shall further explore this point below.

Here I want to evidence the direct derivation of both the pagan and the Christian goddesses from female Neolithic Old European and Minoan prototypes characterized by the quality of the coexistence of seeming contradictory features such as those associated with the very basic foundations of human existence: life-giver, death-wielder, and regeneratrix.⁸⁴

Procreating through the partner's ear: A feat of God

If the priestess Neuris has dedicated the sculpture of a huge right ear to Artemis symbolizing the divine propensity to listen, it was certainly not the intention of the Christian painter when he recycled it as an element of the Annunciation to Virgin Mary. Moreover, the

⁸³ In the Homeric portrait (*Iliades* 21.483), she can execute any woman she wishes, though her killing power is dependent on the will of Zeus. According Lloyd-Jonell (1983: 99), Artemis evolved as a kind protector of women in labour from an original form that was "a dangerous enemy, to be propitiated at great cost."

⁸⁴ Gimbutas and Robbins Dexter 1999: 195. "On vases from the 7th and 6th centuries BC in Archaic Greece, Artemis is still depicted. . .with energy-stimulating symbols—whorls, swastikas, upward-rising snakes—while in her womb is a fish" (Gimbutas 1991: 226). They "offer almost a full catalog of regenerative symbols familiar to us from the Neolithic era" (Gimbutas and Robbins Dexter 1999: 157).

pagan goddess is shown not in power, but unassumingly leaving the scene. What was Theophanes' intention? His insertion of the goddess Artemis was not merely decorative, but significant, because in the Orthodox Church images receive true worship, and the matter as a fresco is accorded relative veneration. The material of the painting under our investigation is inhabited by the divine image of the Madonna at the moment when God is embodied in a physical form and transformed into a *carnal logos*.⁸⁵ Moreover, according to the lofty Cretan ideal, the encounter between the archangel and the virgin was emotive and intimate. The transcendentalism of the event should not be sullied by trivial or marginal elements.⁸⁶ The sense of moderation was not to be transgressed even in the number of characters and pictorial elements put on display.

In order to understand his utilization of the (pagan) divine body part used for listening, we have to start from its special relationship with the strange light that characterizes this Annunciation. As noticed by Lewandowski, a beam of light radiates from Gabriel's fingertips.⁸⁷ It jumps vertically, curves upward, crosses the votive Greek tablet, and then clots on the top right of the scene in the form of a blackish star-shaped luminosity with golden contours. Three bronzed rays gush from the black-radiant star. The central beam of light holds up a dove, as manifestation of the Holy Spirit, positioned in a circle in the center of it, which falls down by pointing straight to the right ear of Virgin Mary.⁸⁸ The archangel transmits the heavenly message on conception and, as soon as he utters it and the Virgin pays attention to it, the *Logos-Verbum* (The word of God, the principle of divine reason and creative order) becomes flesh. The Christian monk-painter utilizes Artemis' ear and penetrates it with divine beams to represent the *conceptio per*

aurem. This expression literally means "conceiving through the ear." It refers to the *Theotókos* miraculous generation of the baby Jesus, the Son of God, through her obedience at the annunciation, metaphorized by her attentive and receptive right ear. In addition, the acoustical metaphor evolved in the notion that the sealed Virgin conceived through the right ear. Mary's ear canal is the organ that was penetrated, saving her vulva by the procreative agent (interchangeably and sometimes simultaneously: a series of seminal words, a white dove, a spirit, a vital breath, or a beam of light).⁸⁹ The incarnation of the Son of God through the right ear of his mother has as pendant his delivery from the womb as a breath. In the Paradise, Gabriel explains itself to Dante Alighieri as "I am angelic love who wheel around / The exalted gaiety breathed from the womb / Which was the inn of all the world's desire."⁹⁰

The *conceptio per aurem* has theological basis in some apocryphal texts to ensure that the Virgin Mary became pregnant through the words that entered her ear when the angel struck the message, because the *Logos-Verbum* penetrated into her without violating her womb.⁹¹ The image passed through the Patristic literature of the Fathers of the Church, medieval

⁸⁵ Pentcheva Bissera 2006: 153.

⁸⁶ Chatzidakis 1986: 109.

⁸⁷ Lewandowski 2006: 242.

⁸⁸ Pastoureau 2002: 140.

⁸⁹ The idea of the *conceptio per aurem* and its fortune into the Christian Church nourished several relevant theological and art-historical studies. Nicholas Constatas of the Harvard Divinity School of Cambridge, Mass. focussed on early Christianity and Proclus of Constantinople 1994 (concerning Homilies 2–5 of Proclus of Constantinople), 1996, and 2003 (concerning Homilies 1–5 of Proclus of Constantinople). The art historian Leo Steinberg has charted the maturation of the *conceptio per aurem* in the pictorial representations of the Annunciation during the XIV through XVI centuries (1987: 25–44). Katarzyna Urbaniak-Walczak, coptologist and keeper at the National Museum in Warsaw, published on the subject of Coptic representations of *conceptio per aurem* and their literary prototypes. See also Appiano 1979; M.-L. von Franz 1980: 268; Anderson 2001: 92–93.

⁹⁰ Dante 2000, canto XXIII, verses 103–105.

⁹¹ *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* 2008: chapter V, 9. The text derives from a sixth-century Syriac script that no longer exists.

exegesis, art, liturgy and traditions. In the Byzantine Church, this seemingly peculiar notion obtained a large theological consensus that was solidified in the V century, largely due to the teaching of Proclus, Patriarch of Constantinople, and his followers.⁹² Literally the expression *conceptio per aurem* might suggest a mythical and unreal meaning, but in reality it is a materialization of the gospel narration about Mary who conceived by listening to the angel.⁹³

If this theological tradition maintains that Virgin Mary conceived through her right ear, it was the huge right ear of Artemis that was recycled by Theophanes to fill the pediment of the Great Lavra refectory as symbolic barycentre of his Annunciation.⁹⁴ In the most explicit pictures illustrating the *conceptio per aurem*, the angel Gabriel touches the Virgin Mary's ear with its hand, or a dove (the Holy Spirit), places its beak in the Virgin's ear, or a beam of light penetrates it.⁹⁵ In other instances, the procreative agent is still far from the *Theotókos'* organ of hearing but is directed towards it with calculated and resolute linear exactitude. In an early X century Coptic illuminated manuscript from an Egyptian synaxarium,⁹⁶ both Mary and the archangel Gabriel point determinedly to her ear to give special emphasis to it as the organ of docile hearing and conception. The text between the two characters is from the annunciation in the Gospel of Luke.⁹⁷

Of all the Christian mysteries to be represented, the staging of Mary's insemination requires the most tact. She incredulously questions Gabriel: "How shall this be, since I know not a man?" (Luke 1: 34). As noticed by

Leo Steinberg, the *Gospel* has an operational approach. If Mary's question points to *whether it would be done*, Gabriel answers her explaining *in what manner, by what means* it is happening.⁹⁸ The archangel is concentrated on clarifying to her how she can conceive without penetration and male semen.⁹⁹ It illustrates to Mary that the impregnation would be accomplished by the Holy Ghost "coming upon her" and by the power of the Highest "overshadowing" her. If the metaphorical and vague cause/consequence proposed to the Virgin satisfied her, who offered instant compliance, it was not the case of Christian theologians and artists. The focus of the virginal body as the site of the miracle cannot be kept aloof. In addition, the idea to represent the joyful event "overshadowing" Mary petrifies both the Fathers of the Church and the painters. To summarize the challenge in front of Theophanes: How to teleport Jesus into his mother's arms to preserve her *parthenia*?

The *conceptio per aurem* attempts to respond, in a singular but effectual apologetic way, to delicate theological and pictorial questions to be represented concerning the insemination in absence of contact and penetration. The theological queries are actually severe. Did Mary conceive and give birth to a human fetus or to a god? Which extraordinary technique was applied to accomplish the prodigious task of giving birth without having sexual intercourse while remaining a virgin?¹⁰⁰ The challenge of finding visual solutions through painting was not less troublesome. How to represent Jesus, as "true God and true human being" and "uncreated creature," just in the instant of his embodiment? How to escape a too physical depiction of the insemination and the formation of animated flesh in a uterus, which would suggest Mary as an ordinary woman and her son Jesus as merely a 'special' man? Conversely, how to avoid painting the

⁹² On the belief of Proclus on the Virgin's *conceptio per aurem*, cf. Proclus, Homilies 3.V, 47–48 in Constatas 2003: chapter 5.

⁹³ De Fiore and Meo 1996: 1461.

⁹⁴ Lewandowski 2006: 243.

⁹⁵ de Saint-Loup 1993: 388.

⁹⁶ It is Ms. M. 597, f. Iv., held at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

⁹⁷ Urbaniak-Walczak 1992: 167-8.

⁹⁸ Steinberg 1987: 24.

⁹⁹ Hagen 2001: 12.

¹⁰⁰ Byrne and McNary-Zak 2009: 158.

incarnation restricted to a spiritual pregnancy that leads to a perception of the physical form of Jesus as an appearance created by God, denying the humanity of the body and blood of Christ? The consequent enquires of the painters were dramatically practical concerning the force of insemination, the path, the entry point, and the organ to be fertilized. Their main problem was finding explanations for the supernatural event that were both visually effective and attractive, but necessarily pleasing to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. How might the procreative agent be painted next to Mary's body? Should it be narrowly focused or dispersed? Should it bypass the Virgin's head to go directly toward the womb? If not, is the chest an allowable target? If not, would the ear be a solution in form of the Word (Logos) entering it?

Steinberg summarizes these questions and rejects them with a certain irreverence in an effort to give a visual criterion to verbal caprices of fertile words or to the fruitful breath.¹⁰¹ However, the question of finding an inventive balance experienced dramatic events within the Christian Oriental Churches. It is useful to recall the long and bloody iconoclastic struggle and the strategic importance of the Incarnation of Christ for theologians who were favorable to the veneration of images: God may be depicted because he became human; he appeared in the flesh and lived among human beings. His incarnation in a visible form makes possible and justifies the production of his material images and the existence of religious art through representation.¹⁰² In antiquity, however, before God would condescend to dwell in matter and bring humanity to salvation through matter, its incorporeal and uncircumscribed persona was not portrayed and could not be depicted. On this point, iconoclasts and iconodules agreed: God cannot be represented in his eternal nature because "no one has ever seen God" (John 1, 18).

Theological success and decline of the credo on Mary conception by virginal ear

The patchwork above the entrance of the refectory of the Great Lavra recovered as a pictorial solution the patristic tradition of the IV century that had promoted the auditory conception through 'insufflation' of the Holy Spirit by the means of the words spoken by Gabriel. It seemed a sensible solution to Mary's pregnancy having the minimum rate of physiology, because it recognizes at the same time her virginal conception, the divine nature of Jesus, and the absence of any physical contact between the archangel and the girl. He had just spoken, and that was enough. The *conceptio per aurem* seemed a good compromise between those who were perplexed by the removing of any physicality from the event, and those who feared the corporeal emphasis with related contamination from the flesh. The *conceptio per aurem* indicated that the spiritual sphere should not necessarily be non-material, but could result in a virtuous materiality.

The spontaneous choosing of the pure ears as a symbolic representation of the unchaste vulva, instead of another organ, was rooted in the culture of ancient Egypt that permeated the desert where the first Christian ascetics had been trained.¹⁰³ According to St. Ephrem (Ephraim, c. 306–373 or 379), Doctor of the Syrian church, Jesus "entered the ear of Virgin Mary and lived secretly in the belly."¹⁰⁴ This mystic, possibly the greatest poet of the patristic literature, composed most of his theology in liturgical poetry. His most popular title was "the Harp of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰⁵ Ephrem is considered by some scholars, such as Ortiz from Urbina, to be the inventor of the aural incarnation.¹⁰⁶ However, the doctrine was

¹⁰¹ Steinberg 1987: 29.

¹⁰² See the Council of Trullo in 692.

¹⁰³ Jütte 2005: 92.

¹⁰⁴ Ephrem 1983: 66 (*Homily on the Nativity* lines 161–166); Craveri 1990: 157, note 4.

¹⁰⁵ Anderson 2001: 108.

¹⁰⁶ Ortiz de Urbina 1954, 1955, 1974.

introduced in the theological milieu of the Roman Church since earliest liturgical texts. The scripts that arrived safe to us are dated from mid-IV century to mid-V century. They belong to St. Zeno from Verona (300–371), who was born in Mauritania, and St. Gaudenzio Bishop of Brescia (327–418).¹⁰⁷ In opposition to Arianism that denied Christ divinity and declared that he was a created being, Zeno points out repeatedly and forcefully the belief in Mary's virginity in childbirth and after childbirth. To this end, he defends the historical value of the events narrated in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James*:¹⁰⁸ the Virgin conceived her Son by divine intervention and the insemination came through her ear in order to counterbalance the guilt of Eve, who had been seduced by the serpent through her listening.¹⁰⁹ St. Gaudenzio maintained that Jesus: "penetrated into his mother's ear, filling Mary's womb."¹¹⁰

At the beginning of the V century, St. Augustine made regular use of this ingenious doctrine in a phase of his teaching, arguing in sermons: "God has spoken through the angel and impregnated the Virgin through the ear."¹¹¹ The Council of Ephesus (431), which canonized Mary as a Virgin "Mother of God," increased the appraisal concerning the procreative sense of her hearing. A significant protagonist of the aural mainstream is among others Theodotus of Ancyra who, literally absorbing the Living God to the Word, maintains the obviousness of the conception *ex auditu* because "the sense of

hearing is the natural channel for the words."¹¹² Reversing cause and effect, the whole event is clearly self-evident to Isaac of Antioch: "If He were not God, how could He get into Mary's ear?"¹¹³

Through the *conceptio per aurem* utilized by Theophanes at the Great Lavra, the figure of Mary was typologically related to that one of Eve, overcoming her and solving troubles created by her. In the absence of Eve, the Cretan monk-painter utilized, as we will explore, Artemis as a double. To achieve this theological task, striking parallels between *Genesis* (2.2–7) and the *Gospel of Luke* (1.26–38) have been identified according to the view of Mary as the New (or Second) Eve.¹¹⁴ They literally interpret the assertion by Tertullian from Carthage (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, c. 160–c. 220) that "As Eve had believed the serpent, so Mary believed the angel."¹¹⁵ The devil introduced sin into the world by whispering into the ear of Eve and persuading her to transgress, generating decay, disease, death and Cain, the demonic son and first assassin.¹¹⁶ In some paintings, the snake stands rigidly upright with open mouth in order to speak directly into the ear of Eve. According to the *contrappasso* law, the punishment will be to crawl along the ground eating dust as its food.¹¹⁷ Contrariwise, the heavenly herald introduced into Mary's ear, the New Eve, seminal sentences through which Jesus incarnated to pay off the scandal committed by the first ancestors of humanity.¹¹⁸ Mary conceived Jesus through

¹⁰⁷ Dal Covolo 2009: 386; Marchi, Orlando, and Brenzoni 1972.

¹⁰⁸ Hock 1996. The *Protoevangelium of James* is dated variously from 120 (less than sixty years after the conclusion of Mary's earthly life) to 160 CE.

¹⁰⁹ Zeno from Verona 1739: I, 3, 10; Löfstedt 1971; Casagrande 1974: 451-457; Banterle 1974.

¹¹⁰ Omelia 9; cf. Omelia 13 in Gaudenzio from Brescia 1996. See also Gambero 1990: 234.

Omelia 9; cf. Omelia 13 in Gaudenzio from Brescia 1996. See also Gambero 1990: 234.

¹¹¹ Augustin 1993: 61 (Sermon 196); 35 (Sermon 189).

¹¹² Theodotus, hom. 4 (PG 77.1392D), cit Constatas 2003: 279.

¹¹³ Bedjan 1903: 715.

¹¹⁴ Guldán 1966.

¹¹⁵ Evans 1956. However, Tertullian asserted that Mary lost her virginity in the conception of Christ: "The virgin's womb, therefore, was especially opened, because it was especially closed" (Schaff and Roberts, vol. 3, 1994: 23).

¹¹⁶ Genesis 3, 1-6.

¹¹⁷ See Anderson 2001: 96, fig. 11; Urbaniak-Walczak 1992: figs. 1, 2.

¹¹⁸ Zeno from Verona 1739: I, 3, 10. See also Delius 1963: 128-129; Sannazaro 2001: 264; González Montañés 2001: 214 note 22.

her ear, undoing Satan's suggestion planted in Eve's ear.

In both of these instances, Eve and Mary, a virgin is left alone for a moment and is approached by a stranger who speaks to her and tries to convince her with extravagant promises that will dramatically alter the fate of the whole of humanity. In both the cases, he also manages to snatch her trust. As Christ reverses the damage done by Eve and Adam, the conversation between Gabriel and Mary reflects and overturns the dialogue between the devil-serpent and Eve. The insemination of Mary through a *pneuma* shot into her ear became the antidote to the hearing of Eva of the poisonous and harmful words uttered by the snake.¹¹⁹ Ephraim the Syrian uses this concise formulation: "Death entered through the ear of Eve, whereas life entered through the ear of Mary."¹²⁰ In the Annunciation from the Chapel of Peace at Al-Baghaûât necropolis, Egypt (IV–VI century), Mary appears in a gesture of prayer, indicative of total and active acceptance of her mystery as a virgin-mother, while a dove in flight (the child Jesus and the Holy Spirit) literally penetrates her right ear.¹²¹ On two sides of the same image, the snake whispers into the disobedient and gullible Eve's ear beguiling her as indicated by the fact that she is gesturing prominently toward that same fateful organ of sense,¹²² and the dove enters the disciplined (but not malleable) and virginal ear of Mary.¹²³ For readers of the Latin Bible, the overturning from Eve to *Theotókos* seemed fatally inscribed in scripture itself, for the greeting extended to Mary by the archangel Gabriel in Latin was *Ave*, a perfect formula of reversal of Eva.¹²⁴

In a progressive de-physicalization of the figure of the Madonna, a progression from denominating her just "Mary," to "Virgin

Mary," to "Ever-Virgin Mary"¹²⁵ occurred,¹²⁶ and since mid-IV century the vast majority of the patristic texts supported the last allocation even if often not considering it a point of dogmatic stance. In 553, the Second Council of Constantinople proclaimed her "perpetual virginity" before, during and after the divine conception. The dogma raised further the quotation of the a-physiological physiology of the ear as a euphemism for the womb. In the same century, St. Eleuterio Tournai praised the unique circumstances of Mary's conception asserting that "The ear was the wife and the angelic word the husband."¹²⁷ A French hymn, often attributed to the bishop Venantius Fortunatus, dates from the same century and is sung even nowadays. It intones: "Thus the centuries are astonished / that the angel has brought the seed / the virgin has conceived through the ear / and, believing in his heart, has given birth."¹²⁸ If nothing else, there is consciousness of the awe felt by people in ordinary physical state regarding the clergy professing such mystery events.

If the bizarre notion of ears' fertility of Mary was one of the classic patristic tropes,¹²⁹ over time it remained in place as a minority opinion, but never in odor of heresy. In the Byzantine Church to which Mount Athos is *the* vanguard, the rising and declining parable of the theory concerning the fruitful Marian listening is included between two patriarchs of Constantinople who are famous for doctrine and power: the aforementioned Proclus in the V century and Photius in the IX century. Proclus (patriarch between 434–446), disciple of Saint John Chrysostom, was among the most influential theologians in power in the Byzantine Church. He did not limit himself to doctrinal assertions such as "Through the ears

¹¹⁹ Constan 2003: 282.

¹²⁰ Ephrem 1993: 4, 15.22.

¹²¹ Schwartz 1962.

¹²² Constan 1994.

¹²³ Urbaniak-Walczak 1992: figs. 1, 2.

¹²⁴ Jolly 1997: 60; Anderson 2001: 93.

¹²⁵ In c. 426 CE, in the *Document of Amendment 3* at a Council of Carthage, Leoporius was the first who applied the title "Ever-Virgin" to Mary.

¹²⁶ Gillquist 1989: 110.

¹²⁷ Steinberg 1987: 28.

¹²⁸ Schulte 1898: 120ff; Warner 1990: 75.

¹²⁹ Girón-Negrón 2001.

that had disobeyed Him, the snake instilled its poison. However, through the ears that have obeyed, the Word entered to form a living temple.”¹³⁰ The patriarch of Constantinople organized his followers to give normative status to the miraculous conception by the sense of hearing.¹³¹ Virgin Mary was therefore venerated through a series of imaginative epithets ranging from pristine relic and workshop of the bi-natural Christ, to the ear through which the Word entered into the womb from which he escaped without breaking the virginal seals.¹³²

After a series of troubled and intriguing stories impossible to be detailed here, the *conceptio per aurem* declined progressively in the Oriental Church. Finally, it became a laughing stock in the bitter anti-Western polemics of the bi-Patriarch Photios I (c. 820–893, patriarch between 858–867 and 877–886 after reintegration).¹³³ Actually, if the *conceptio per aurem* solves some theological tangles, it creates others not less intricate. For example, if the Virgin became pregnant simply because her ear was struck by the sound of the archangel voice (Luke 1.28), her consent to the incarnation was only after the event (Luke 1.38); a dynamic that empties meaning and value of her obedient acceptance. How to rescue the already low Marian free will?¹³⁴ The solution was to oppose the docile gullibility of Eve, verbally suggested by the snake, to the lucid understanding and determined acceptance by Mary. After human reluctance and perplexity, *Theotókos*’ obedient hearing and receptive ear to the word of the angel Gabriel resulted in the conception of the Son of God. As noticed by Gary A. Anderson, “Mary’s obedience to the angel’s charge was neither craven nor easily won.”¹³⁵ The point of emphasis is switched from carnal knowledge to an act of reasoned understanding and willed

obedience to the mystery of the Incarnation.¹³⁶ The late Byzantine writer Nicholas Cabasilas asserted that the Word could not take up residence within Mary until she had given her humble consent to become the Servant of God: “Let it be done according to your word.”¹³⁷ This is a key point to understand the theological depth of the *conceptio per aurem* exploited by Theophanes.¹³⁸

Finally, the priorities among the Christian major mysteries split between West and East. While the first focused progressively on the enigmas of the Incarnation of Christ and the Passion, in the Orient the emphasis was put on the Resurrection. In the Christian Orthodox Church, the upper hierarchy preferred the *conceptio per fidem*, which was not very favored by painters due to modest white lightning and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending in a nonspecific manner on the head (preferably bowed and subservient) of Mary. In the Western Church, for a longer time the *conceptio per aurem* has been in tight competition with the generation of Christ in other Marian anatomies.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Ibid.: 92-93.

¹³⁷ Quoted by Anderson 2001: 97.

¹³⁸ The *conceptio per aurem* is not a “theological shorthand,” according to the efficacious expression from Conostas 1994.

¹³⁹ The *conception in praecordia*, near the heart, by the popular theologian Peter from Lucca, † 1522 (IV, 1576: 200-215), the Dominican Girolamo Armenini from Faenza (Armenini 1511) was often utilized in pictorial representations (Sannazaro 2001: 264). Breast/ chest is an obvious euphemism for the womb.

Less quoted of the *conception per aurem*, but certainly not less original, was the *conception per oculis*. An enamel plaque in champlevé technique on gilded copper realized in 1181 by Nicolas de Verdun for the Abbey Church of Klosterneuburg in Austria illustrates how the archangel Gabriel made Virgin Mary pregnant penetrating her eyes (Buschhausen 1974). Like in a hypnotist show, he is pointing the right open hand with fingers outstretched straight to her face. The observer seems to hear him ordering persuasively: “Eyes to me, please.” Two horizontal laser rays, Star Wars type, squirt out of the angelic fingers to reach the target: the eyeballs of Mary. For her, the vision of the light in the dark occurs simultaneously to the inception of God. Nicolas de

¹³⁰ Proclus, horn. 3. V, 47–48, cit. Conostas 2003: 4.

¹³¹ Ibid.: 274.

¹³² Proclus from Costantinopoli, Homily I on Theotókos 1.10.

¹³³ Cooper 2010.

¹³⁴ Conostas 2003: 295.

¹³⁵ Anderson 2001: 97.

If the Virgin aural fertilization through the seed of the divine Word seems today a somewhat outlandish idea of Frankenstein type, it was not centuries ago either for the theological credo and liturgy. The antiphony *ad crucem septies* for the first Sunday of Advent, included in the seventh-eighth century *Ambrosian Antiphonal*, intones (in Latin): “Here you have the heavens opened with the descent of Gabriel the archangel, who became ambassador of the Verbum, so that the Virgin would conceive in the ear what then She will accomplish in her physical womb.”¹⁴⁰ In the *Roman Antiphonal*, it is chanted:

The angels praise thee, O holy Mother of God, who knew no man and brought in your womb the Lord: through the ear you have conceived our Lord, because thou might be proclaimed blessed among all women.¹⁴¹

Verdun realized also the Shrine of the Three Kings, from Cologne Cathedral.

According to Steinberg, the metaphor of the impregnating dew appealed chiefly to poets; pictorial practice hardly responded to it. However, the dew as inseminating agent and the ear as inseminated container were not antithetic, but cooperating for the same target. Sagaciously salomonic was Melchior Broederlam when, towards the end of the XIV century, planned the panel of the Annunciation for the altarpiece at the Chartreuse of the Holy Trinity in Champmol (near Dijon, France). The archangel blurts fateful phrases unrolling a strip of parchment that, like a taught snake, curls up and down in paper spires and goes with sinuous movements toward the ear of an astonished Mary. Taking advantage of the confusion, God “spits” from the mouth a brilliant beam-breath that, reaching over the Virgin’s head and around her ears, pulverizes into a golden shower that resembles the ploy used by Zeus to unite with Danae.

More pervasively influential was the notion of miraculous insemination by divine breath inflated into the virginal womb. This idea of a heavenly creative exhalation developed since the III century and was subsequently embodied by the dove as the *spiritus* (breath of air) *sanctus*. In naive or resolutely literal representations, God appears aloft on high clouds, blowing down through a tube; or exhaling the dove itself (Steinberg 1987: 25).

¹⁴⁰ *Breviarium Ambrosianum*, 1830: 205.

¹⁴¹ Hesbert 1970; Gambero 1990: 924.

In the *Responsory for the Advent*, it is recited,

The Archangel Gabriel gave to the Virgin Mary the tidings of the entrance of the King. And he entered a luminous street, through the ear of the Virgin, to visit the palace of the womb, and exited through the golden door of the Virgin.¹⁴²

A German anthem sings since 1349:

The message came through her ear,
and the Holy Spirit flew with it,
and so it worked in her body so that
Christ became God and man.¹⁴³

It is echoed by the hint of a popular English medieval hymn (*Hymn To The Five Joys of the Virgin*) which provides (in Latin):

Rejoice O Virgin Mother of Christ,
Rejoice O Virgin Mother of Christ
who become pregnant by the ear
as Gabriel proclaimed.¹⁴⁴

Several historians attribute these verses to St. Thomas Becket (1118–1170).¹⁴⁵ The hymn is still well known being performed in the repertoires of the Orlando Consort and the Hilliard Ensemble. The supernatural conception of Christ through the words entering by the Virgin ear distinguished sermons that have been popular since Middle Ages to late Renaissance, from the afore-mentioned Bernardus Claraeullensis to the French theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704).¹⁴⁶ Even medieval and Renaissance poets were familiar

¹⁴² Hesbert 1970; Gambero 1990: 921.

¹⁴³ “Diu botschaft gie zeir oran in der hailig haist flos damit in der wohnt in ir libe daz das cristus got und mensche waz.” Quoted by Steinberg 1987: 31, 43 fn. 25.

¹⁴⁴ “Gaude virgo Mater Christi / Gaude Virgo Mater Christi / que per aurem concepisti / Gabrieli nuncio” in “Antiphona of Hymn to the five Joys of the Virgin,” from *Analecta hymnica*, vol. 31, 1898: 176. See also Chevalier 1892-1912: RH 7013.

¹⁴⁵ González Montañés 1996: 13, fn. 8.

¹⁴⁶ Cooper 2010.

with the notion. It suffices to quote Edmund Spenser, in *Hymne of Heavenly Love*.¹⁴⁷

Several theologians believed so strongly in the *conception per aurem* to find convincing parallels in the animal world. They quoted both the *Greek Physiologist* and the *Latin Bestiary* where it is explained that the weasel conceives through the mouth, where the male has poured the seed, and bears through the ears. The right ear gives birth to a male; from the left, to a female. However, Richard de Fournival in the *Bestiary of Love* turns everything upside down (aural impregnation and labial delivery of the weasel),¹⁴⁸ producing a migraine to the poor animal with all that go and reverse direction in the head. The theological exploitation of this mustelid is however appropriate. In *Gesta Romanorum*, it comes to represent John the Baptist or even Christ, since the weasel is an implacable successful enemy of basilisks and snakes, symbolic agents of Satan.¹⁴⁹ It has thus reversed the curse of the Bible against this animal, prohibited as a food being an “unclean beast” for how it conceives and bears babies. Believers compared to this mustelid are those who initially accept the word of God but, after a short time, they lose interest becoming deaf to it. They have blocked their ears as the pregnant weasel.

At the time of the Annunciation of the Great Lavra, the race of creativity in order to impose different metaphorical target anatomies was still ongoing even if the aforementioned *conceptio per fidem* was privileged by the clergy hierarchies. In the West, the competition ended a few decades later, when the Council of Trent (1545–1563) condemned any depiction of the Incarnation outside the womb of the Virgin. The divine fertilization would take place in Mary’s mind-listening, trusting and conceiving—even before having the body of Jesus in her uterus. “Faith in mind, Christ in womb,”

summarizes St. Augustine.¹⁵⁰ Mind is an even more intangible body part than the ear. According to the patristic literature as echoed by monks in their statements, the mind is not the organ of rationality. It is the organ of contemplation dwelling in the depths of soul and known as the “intellect” (*noisis*). When purified, mind can allow man to know God or the inner essences or principles of created things through direct apprehension or spiritual perception.¹⁵¹ Therefore, the mind is the instrument for the knowledge of God and resides in the heart.¹⁵² The insemination of Mary thus becomes telepathic and combines well with the humility and the faith of the servant praised in the *Magnificat*. However, St. Paul teaches that faith comes by hearing.¹⁵³ Therefore, the competition was never over. In fact, St. Bernardus Claraeuallensis (1090–1153) attempted to square the circle, arguing in his homilies that Gabriel was sent from God to pour out the Father’s word in the ear of the Virgin, which passed into the belly and mind.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Sermon 196 (Hill 1993: 61); Sermon 189, op. cit., 35.

¹⁵¹ Sarris 2000: 236, n. 3.

¹⁵² Reason (*dianoia*) functions to reach conclusions through deductive reasoning and to formulate abstract concepts from data provided either by spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) or by observational senses. Knowledge derived from reason is therefore considered to be of a lower order than spiritual knowledge or the knowledge of the intellect. Knowledge inspired by God, and so linked with immediate spiritual perception which is the work of the intellect, is beyond the scope of reason (Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware 1979: 362, 364, 365).

¹⁵³ Aude de Saint-Loup (1993: 390), who is very sensitive concerning the ancient exclusion of deaf people from the Church refusing them baptism, notices that the conception by ears reflects the medieval mentality concerning the efficiency of faith, according to which faith comes through listening. The Church accepted deaf monks only in the XIV century, around Theophanes’ time.

¹⁵⁴ “Missus est interim angelus Gabriel a Deo, ut Verbum Patris per aurem Virginis in ventrem et mentem ipsius eructaret, ut eadem via intraret antidotum, qua venenum intraverat.” St. Bernardus Claraeuallensis online, In *Festo Pentecostes, Sermo II. De operibus Trinitatis super nos, et de triplici gratia Spiritus sancti* (Patr. Lot. clxxxiii. cols. 420-421).

¹⁴⁷ Spenser 1908: 42–49.

¹⁴⁸ Malaxecheverria 1986: 164 ff.; 1991: 41 ff.

¹⁴⁹ Dick 1890.

The notion of the aural embodiment of Virgin Mary had a luxuriant development, not without contrasts, in the XV century,¹⁵⁵ nearly the time of Theophanes.

Three tremendous advantages from the *conceptio per aurem* to Theophanes's planning of his Annunciation

If the *conceptio per aurem* conferred a solid theological inspiration to Theophanes when he planned his Annunciation, as a solution to the incarnation of Christ without implying any impurities, it granted him three tremendous advantages from the point of view of the pictorial practice. The first is, as we have already mentioned, the ability to de-emphasize the sexual implications of virginal insemination. Applying a mapping of body and senses based on a layered topography that disconnects "higher" and "lower" zones, the *conceptio per aurem* involves Mary's impregnation through the orifice that has the advantage to be further away from the unspeakable one. The Athonite *conceptio per aurem* moves to the highest levels of sensorial perception, and therefore de-sexualizes functions distinctive of the lower sections, those closely related to the material body and its reproduction. It served also to distinguish the supernatural conception of Christ from divine abductions of women in Greek mythology.¹⁵⁶ To avoid any corporeality, Theophanes decides to send down the inseminator ray from the top of the scene. Very different was, for example, Filippo Lippi's solution. In his London Annunciation (1457–1458), the dove has relinquished its normal high-flying station on the same level of Mary's womb; the golden motes emitted from its beak are directed towards the Virgin's belly.

Secondly, Marian inception of pregnancy by listening sustains the pictorial challenge to represent the vision of St. John the Evangelist of Christ as the tangible embodiment of the divine

Word, the "Word made flesh."¹⁵⁷ The *conceptio per aurem* makes reasonable and illustrable the unillustrable miracle of a transmission of divine words that becomes the impregnating agent.

The third pictorial benefit in depicting the Annunciation by the fertilization of Mary's ear-womb is firmly rooted in the patristic credo on the divine breath.¹⁵⁸ The notion of the Holy Spirit, the facilitating agent of the incarnation, is represented to match its literal etymology of 'spirit' or 'breath of air'. It was a strategic advantage for Theophanes in a sanctuary proud to keep alive the original tradition of the Fathers of the Church as is Mount Athos. He possibly pondered that ascribing such a wonder as the pregnancy of a woman who remains a virgin to the breath of God *ex auditu* was the ideal to show, and at the same time it protects an inscrutable secret of the immaculate conception that would be unsustainable under more scrupulous and demanding theological investigations. Moreover, the monk-painter correlated the divine exhalation into the virginal ear to the blow by which God gave life to Adam, according to *Genesis*.¹⁵⁹

The Cretan monk-painter realized one of the most interesting and famous attempts to create a visual arrangement and explanation of the mysterious event of the Annunciation-Incarnation, but he was not the first to depict the insemination *ex auditu* of a *virgo intacta*. He had several examples at his disposal. We have already mentioned the painting in the Chapel of Peace at Al-Baghaûât necropolis in Egypt. On the twelfth century altar of the Passion in the church of the Cistercian nunnery at Marienthal on Netze-Neisse (Germany), a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit emerges from the mouth of God. Sliding on a beam of light, it is resolutely direct to the ear of Mary. A very explicit version of the mystery of the angelic-

¹⁵⁵ Sannazaro 2001: 264.

¹⁵⁶ Conostas 2003: 4.

¹⁵⁷ Byrne and McNary-Zak 2009: 158.

¹⁵⁸ Steinberg 1987.

¹⁵⁹ *Genesis* 1, 7.

virginal *Confabulatio* is contained within a capital letter R from an illustrated manuscript of 1300 held at Sankt Katharinenthal on Lake Constance. The page was probably painted by Dominican nuns. It is opened with the entrance song *Rorate caeli de super* that is intoned during the Feast of the Annunciation. The notifying R is now kept at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The archangel is barefoot, with a salmon-colored tunic and spread out wings. It is addressing to the Virgin Mary who is raising both hands as an answer. The painter intended to depict her prayer and humble acceptance of the inevitable fate, but it seems that she is shaking her long and irritable hands to drive out the dove of the Holy Spirit that was planted upright into her ear.

Like at the Great Lavra, archangel and Virgin are standing, facing each other with the same size and height, indicating the same rank even if they have not the same status. Nevertheless, she has a posture of subordinate acceptance in the Swiss page, while at *Agion Oros* she shows above all surprise at being appealed by a 'strange' stranger with outlandish offers. On the manuscript, Gabriel makes the sign of V with index finger and middle finger of his right hand, in the Churchill-style. Was it pointing out "victory" to whom, far in the high sky, is following the event with mounting apprehension?

Erupted from a white globe of light (the energy source), a beam and a dove are diving towards Mary's right ear, in a Byzantine fresco of marvelous workmanship painted around 1300–1310 in Santa Maria del Casale in Brindisi (Italy). Lorenzo Veneziano, Italian painter in the Byzantine style (1312–1372), decides to throw on the head of Mary, in sequence: a white dove with outstretched wings and the size of an eagle, a dolly and then, diving acrobatics, directly God the Father. It is the entire cooperating Trinity into the capable ear of a virgin, who seems to have such a receptive talent to display in real time a protruding belly.

A whole stream of *mirabile* divine insemination by hearing starts with the Annunciation with Saints Ansano and Margarita painted by Simone Martini in 1333, now in the Uffizi in Florence. The archangel has just landed, as noticeable from the mantle still full of air. The salutation comes out from its lips in the form of gold letters. As in comics, the painter addresses them straight to the right ear of a shame-faced Madonna penetrating it, because he wants to be sure that the viewer understands that the formulas have been heard from her. The Virgin is pervaded by a tremor. However, we are only at the preliminary moment of the impregnation. Simone Martini captures the two in the incipit presentations.¹⁶⁰ The dove is inflexibly flying towards Mary's head escorted by a formation of flame colored Seraphin-birds, but it is still far from her. Very near to the target, Mary's ear, is the candid Columbidae launched by God in the Annunciation painted from 1390 to 1399 by Pietro from Miniato, a pupil of Giotto, on the counter-facade of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Unlike the Great Lavra, however, here the bird flutters free and is not on the tracks of a dark-bright beam. In the church of Saint Egidio Abate at Cerqueto (Teramo, Italy), a fragment of a fresco from the fifteenth century depicts a wonderful face of the Annunciated Virgin. Riding on a beam of light, a jabbering and radiant dove heads toward the venerable ear. It is murmuring formulas also at the cathedral of Ferrara, where Cosimo Tura proposes one of the most precise interpretations of the *conceptio per aurem*. For centuries, the fatal holy bird harassed the Marian ear canal, at all latitudes. It does it even on medieval stained glass windows of Saint Mary in Shelton and Bale, Norfolk (England), although there the dove appears to be less intrusive, limited to whispering in her right ear incantatory and seminal phrases.

¹⁶⁰ For this reason it is impossible to decide if the uttered words are the actual factor of pregnancy, or are only listened to by Virgin Mary.

Ingenious are the visual tricks devised to tighten the aural procreativity of the Blessed Virgin between two fires: on the one hand, God with the vital seminal breath and, on the other hand, Gabriel with fertilizing sentences. In 1344, Ambrogio Lorenzetti decides to hit Madonna's throat with the germinal words shot by Gabriel, whereas a dove is launched like a missile towards her right ear by God the Father. Disdaining the herald, she looks up and squeezes her hands to her chest, much more anxious about the damage that may be imposed by the bullet than touched by the mystery of the divine incarnation. In the retable of the main altar at the Cartuja de Miraflores in Burgos, painted in 1499, a golden ray of light goes from a bearded God in the highest heaven to Mary. An infant is using it as a slide, diving face down with hands clasped in her right ear. An elegant Gabriel seems to threaten the reluctant and concerned virgin with a stick around which the parchment with the prophetic phrases is twisting. All these examples seem to be designed by a military strategist eager to give no refuge to Mary. God the Father, being the Eternal before the beginning of time, should be portrayed without any age (neither young, nor elderly), while the painting choice is always of a bearded and obese retiree. The contrast between his rancid ugliness and the fresh beauty of Gabriel leads inevitably to the thought that the powerful elder has planned the announcing theater to delude a teenage virgin by sending her a young handsome herald, while the actual impregnator remains hidden behind the curtain of clouds. The seminal sentences reach the Marian ear moving in circular coils. They have sinuous movements as a snake, to remember and exorcise at the same time the satanic reptile that deceived Eve. Mary is made unable to escape.

Another masterpiece enriches our iconographic catalogue about the aural embodiment and contributes to our study. The Metropolitan Museum in New York keeps a tapestry with the

Annunciation from the Netherlands. It was woven around 1410–1420. The young woman looks away from the book she is reading. She is surprised by the sudden arrival of the archangel Gabriel. It is semi-hiding itself behind a column, but is putting a scroll well on display with the words *Ave gracia plena*. From heaven, God the Father (identical to the one from Burgos) hurls the dove of the Holy Spirit toward the Virgin, and then the baby Jesus hangs on a flying cross as a witch rides on her broomstick. All these figures point in-flight to the procreative ear as in a competition. The launch of the cross-boomerang has just happened. God still has his right hand raised at the conclusion of the action and is self-evaluating the result with piercing and anxious eyes. The shot was not an easy task because, apart from the considerable distance of the target, he had to hold up the world on the other hand. Luckily, the virgin was stationary, reading intently. Flying birds, crosses and infants: the actual miracle is celebrated in the remarkable capacity of the Marian ear. The Virgin Mary receives the blessing from *sitting* inside a wealthy house to symbolize her prominence to the messenger.

An unequivocal *conceptio per aurem* was conceived for the tympanum of the north portal in the church of Our Lady at Würzburg, Bavaria (1430–1440), a late Gothic gem of the fifteenth century. God the Father is pulling his breath in a pre-heart attack, because he has just blown the Baby Jesus along a serpentine tube that extends from its divine mouth to the ear of Mary. A completely formed Christ descends on Earth exploiting Mary's body as a pipeline, without mixing with her flesh.¹⁶¹ Gabriel is unwinding a strip of parchment with the fateful phrases of the Annunciation/Incarnation. The band is appropriately assuming the form of a question mark.

To conclude, Theophanes had at his disposal a solid theological scholarship and several fascinating artistic solutions when he planned his amazing *conceptio per aurem*.

¹⁶¹ Martin 1946; Schreiner 1994.

The schemata of the luminescent inseminating darkness

At the refectory of the Great Lavra, the light of the Spirit is about to pounce on Mary with calculated linear exactitude, irradiating her in a wondrous divine abstraction. The impregnating beam is made of mysterious dark shadows, whereas the outlines are marked in gold. Theophanes ingeniously solves the challenge to illustrate the famous image from the Gospel of Luke 1:35 (“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God”) without casting Mary in the dark.¹⁶² The tri-division of the light draws the simultaneous presence of the three divine persons in the event. Moreover, the black color expresses humility and renunciation: as the Holy Spirit and Gabriel are docile instruments of God’s will and plan, so it must be Mary. Finally, the luminescent darkness indicates the blindness of the observer due to the overpowering splendor of divine light.

Divine fertilization exploits as agents a coffee-colored light bursting from a dark star and a dove riding it. It is not an oddity from the Great Lavra that both are focused on Mary’s head and ear. In Oriental Churches, this scenario is in momentous company. As in several other images from our survey,¹⁶³ someone from heaven takes advantage of Mary’s surprise shooting toward her ear impregnating proxies. However, the Orthodox Church is reluctant to portray the bearded elderly God the Father. The beam is sprouting from a darkish globular star, symbol of His omnipotence.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² During the Transfiguration, a bright cloud cast a shadow over Jesus and his disciples, then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:1-8).

¹⁶³ These representations are from Ohrid, the School of Moscow, Damiani, Crivelli and Santa Maria del Casale.

¹⁶⁴ To contrast, in an icon of the Annunciation from Novgorod of the XIV century, with the Martyr Theodore of Tyre as a witness of the event, the globular sphere high in the sky shoots a ray towards Mary that is not of light,

Significant are some previous and coeval parallels of inseminating dark light from the Byzantine cultural milieu. The Annunciation of Ohrid and a little earlier miniature mosaic from Constantinople are worth mentioning. The first image was painted in mid-XIV century. The archangel has a very similar posture to that one of Athos, including movement of the legs, shape of the open wings and handling of the long stick. Mary is sitting. Even here, her head is bombarded by a beam of dark light with a dove proceeding from a blackish object suspended in the sky. However, in the Annunciation of Ohrid, the fertilizing light is full black, without the gold outlines as at the Great Lavra. The same impact of a black ray, but without a visible dove, on the Virgin head occurs in a miniature mosaic from Constantinople realized in 1300–1325. It is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Here, too, Gabriel has a long pastoral. It ends with a Byzantine cross, a double cross.

The *schemata* of a darkish inseminating compound made of beams and dove is reproduced on ancient icons worshipped in the Russian Orthodox Church. In the Annunciation of Ustiug, painted in the first half of the XII century in Novgorod, now held by the Tret’jakov Gallery, a thin blue ray extends from the blessing hand of the celestial herald up to Mary’s lap. The three rays that glide over Mary’s head in a famous icon painted in 1408 by Andrey Tretyakov Rubylov, now displayed at the Tret’jakov gallery in Moscow, are definitely raven. The same iconographical model is applied on the XIV century tempera on wood preserved in the Cathedral of St. Sophia Novgorod, and on an icon from the Moscow School now housed in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. A star exploding rays of fertility, gray colored and edged in white, very similar to those of Athos, appears in a fresco painted in the XIV century by Damian, possibly an immigrant

but of fire. It is going to penetrate her with an incandescent globe.

from Constantinople, in the monastery of Ubisi (Georgia). The painting captures a startled Mary, because she is almost attacked by the archangel and the directional lightning has just struck her right ear, inoculating a small body.



Figure 8: The Greek tablet between a dark Sun and Moon.

Theophanes decided to depict the Salutation rather than the Annunciation

The Annunciation composed by the experienced monk-painter Theophanes at the Great Lavra has visual, artistic, and aesthetic qualities. It is a masterpiece of high innovativeness for not less than two reasons provoking particular iconographic and ideological interest. Firstly, it is a patchwork that exploits a tri-dimensional plastic component (a votive plaque with a representation in high relief) to underline a topical moment of the mariological scene depicted in the fresco, rendering the mystic mystery visible. Secondly, it employs two pagan art-religious agents from classical Greek (Artemis' right ear and Artemis in person) as key elements of the narration of a founding event in Christian theology as the supernatural embodiment of God, the Son in human flesh. As we have corroborated, the ear of the pagan virgin goddess illustrates Theophanes' artistic solution, based on firm theological ground and attractive antecedent renderings in painting, of the insemination without sexual defloration and

penetration¹⁶⁵ of an evergreen maiden. We will deal now with the second.

So far, we have enquired many parallels between the Annunciation on the facade of the Great Lavra refectory and representations of the same topic, but in none of them are traces of pagan testimonials. How do we explain the presence of the goddess Artemis as a privileged spectator of the divine announcement? In order to answer, we need to focus on the environment of the event and on the protagonists.

In the representation of the Great Lavra, the destined meeting takes place outdoors. The characters are acting on barren land devoid of trees and flowers. It is the rocky and impervious southern area of the peninsula that is called the "Athonite desert," by the monks forcing imagination on their habitat to evidence roots in the tradition of the anchorites who spent their lives praying in the arid oriental deserts. Behind the personages of the Annunciation, a fortified complex of buildings is depicted. The structures in the background are painted with a palette of colors that fits the set of warm tones combining yellow, cream, brick red, coffee color, shades of orange and black. Above all, Sun and Moon are represented as subsidiary ingredients (Figure 8). They represent the entire universe and are measures of the time, day and night, but also of periodic cycles. It has to be noticed that they are turned towards the huge ear. Their rays are focused on it. The ear is also surmounted by a gray nimbus made of concentric spheres, abstract representation of the creative potency of God the Father.

The actors of the representation are three: Gabriel, Mary and Artemis. They express a great narrative, because they are actual protagonists: dynamically designed, strongly characterized, and perfectly expressive in positions, gestures and traits. Theophanes painted monumental characters regardless of their huge size. The *terzetto* totally ignores the viewer, being engaged in a concentrated

¹⁶⁵ Hagen 2001:12.

bi-interrelation: Gabriel–Mary and Mary–Artemis. The Mother of God is *the* link between two different stories. The iconographical equilibrium in the positioning of the three divine characters determines part of the artistic success of the Annunciation we are investigating, even if Gabriel and the *Theotókos* are standing far away. Technically the artist could not place them closer due to the central position of the window on which the plaque with Artemis' ear was walled. Two aforementioned key elements should be added to the scene: the huge ear of marble and the fecundating dark ray of light bearing a dove.

Gabriel and the *Theotókos* stand facing each other according to the Hellenistic-Byzantine iconographical tradition as noticed by G. Millet.¹⁶⁶ They have identical size, indicating the same celestial origin. However, the future mother of God is placed by Theophanes on a pedestal that elevates her to a higher position than the herald to symbolize an inner essence that overtops the angelic one. The base on which she stands opens the scene toward the viewer and at the same time, being painted axonometrically, designates a movement of the Virgin forward, directed toward the messenger. In addition, it induces the observer to notice that the rendezvous takes place on Earth and not in some heavenly sphere. With regard to the differences of status, it should also be annotated that she is wearing footwear like the other goddess, Artemis. Contrariwise, the ambassador has bare feet. Mary also wears an imposing ring with a red gem on the middle finger of her right hand. The prospect of importance is applied to the pagan goddess, too. She is depicted with smaller dimensions, not only because she is moving away from the scene, but above all due to the minor role she now plays on the stage of the world.

All the three characters are wearing dark and sober suits with detailed draping that do not differentiate them chromatically from the

surrounding environment. They wear garments more appropriate to agents of the Earth and humanity than to sacred, intangible and faraway representatives of the Christian heaven or pagan Olympus. Virgin Mary and Gabriel are not suffused with oriental spirituality as most of the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Annunciations. Their celestial being is revealed only by their halos. Theophanes intended to outline the anthropocentric message of Salvation.

Focusing on the fatal relationship between the herald sent from high above and the virgin, we can notice that the first has just supervened. This fact is evidenced by the still inflated wings and by the ruffled and billowing drapery due to the wind of the long flight, as in Simone Martini and in the letter R in the manuscript of the monastery of Sankt Katharinenthal. The swollen wings give it a resolute posture. As in the Byzantine annunciations already investigated, the heavenly messenger should have landed just a few seconds before, a little hastily and with some coordination problems: the wings are asymmetric (the right one is lower and extended),¹⁶⁷ legs are still one behind the other and a little bent, feet are resting precariously on the tips. It did not have yet time to plant the long stick in the ground, but keeps it temporarily under an arm. It is not a scepter, sign of divine authority, as in several other Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Annunciations (Figure 9). It is the typical rod of travelers, messengers and people with household or village authority. And it is a symbol of the pilgrim, too.

The early Christian notion of the *conceptio per aurem* recognizes Gabriel as the intermediary intended to express and convey the word of God. It is an unreal creature, with little substance and personality. Nonetheless, it has multi-colored wings, heavenly beauty, celestial magnificence and above all a captivating and fecundating voice. This does not necessary

¹⁶⁶ Millet 1916: 68.

¹⁶⁷ This detail has been developed throughout the centuries also to fill the pictorial available space.



Figure 9: Archangel Gabriel on the left side of the scene.

mean that the archangel impregnates Mary with *logoi* whispered into her ear as maintained by some scholars.¹⁶⁸ Conversely, the archangel portrayed by Theophanes is an authentic personage. It has a long green-brown cloak, allegory of long travelling to announce renewing life and hope connected to it. Symbolically, it wears attire that suits a traveler-pilgrim in contrast with other depictions of the portentous notification where sumptuous polychrome and gold robes emphasize its divine origin and profession of God's messenger to humans. Under the mantle, Gabriel is dressed in a white tunic (*chiton*) which expresses its transcendence, since it is a divine creature, and announces the birth of the Son of God, new life for humanity. His gaze is joyful, pleased to convey the good news. Slight twist of the body and gesture indicate that it is starting to talk.

The color of Mary's clothing does not stand out from the surroundings, either (Figure 10). The brownish fully-draped long garment with sleeves indicates that she is like a plowed soil ready to receive the seed to bear fruit. The brick-red color of her coat corresponds to the roofs of the buildings right behind the scene, contributing to integrate not only foreground to background, but also to connect the Virgin to



Figure 10: Virgin on the right side of the Annunciation.

those edifices, according to a specific meaning we below explore.

This series of clues leads to perceive that the momentous mariological scene happened within an environment that is neither the extra-terrestrial kingdom of God, nor the earthly sphere transfigured by the divine light as in many other Annunciations. In addition, herald and young female do not meet in a bipartite scene opposing Heaven and Earth as in several coeval Annunciations. In these instances, the Virgin is on the right in terrestrial sphere; according to the first and main category of iconographical examples from early Christian to Post-Byzantine periods,¹⁶⁹ she is within an enclosed setting such as inside her house, a room, a palace, a church, in the garden or under a porch. The archangel is on the left, outside of the anthropic set, because it is arriving from the rarefied celestial regions. Theophanes decided instead to represent the mystery of the divine embodiment within the frame of human world, in a desert open space in front of buildings. The architectural background also gives historical substance and narrative depth to the Annunciation.

Gabriel catches Mary unexpectedly, while she is busy talking with Artemis, and the pagan

¹⁶⁸ Byrne and McNary-Zak 2009: 158.

¹⁶⁹ Charalampidis 2007: 27.

goddess is preparing to bow out. The painter fixes the Virgin full of wonder in a transitional moment. She is just arisen from the bench on which she was sitting. She has body and hands still directed towards the goddess to whom she was saying goodbye, but she impulsively turns head and torso towards the words of greeting uttered by the stranger. It is exactly the moment when the messenger is pronouncing the initial expression of goodwill, as underlined by its open hand according to a well-known gesture that indicates both its spiritual power and the transfer of the divine message: “Hail, O favored One! The Lord is with you...” (Luke 1: 28). Theophanes decided to render the Salutation rather than the Annunciation.

The swirl of the archangel dissolves into the composed pose of the Virgin, despite her surprise. The fact that Gabriel and Mary are in a delicate preliminary moment is confirmed and emphasized by Mary’s perplexed attitude. The sudden appearance of the stranger has petrified her in an expression that is more of surprise and intrigued attention than of alarm and shyness. She neither clasps her hands on her chest in a defensive posture—as in the painting by Lorenzetti—nor does she attempt to hide her face from the newcomer, as depicted by Simone Martini. She has not raised her hands in prayer, humbly receiving the inevitable, as in several images we have already investigated. Accordingly, her head is not bent in front of the heavenly messenger to underline her full acceptance. Rather, she focuses on the friendly gesture of the hand of the archangel that indicates the incipit Salutation. Among the various encoded steps in the relationship of emissary/receiver, the fresco shows the *cogitatio* of the girl: “And she wondered what kind of sense had a greeting like this” (Luke 1:29). Theophanes fixes the moment, described in a homily attributed (incorrectly) to Chrysostom in honor of the Feast of the Annunciation, as an element of the settled Orthodox liturgy in which



Figure 11: Blessing gesture of the archangel Gabriel

element of the settled Orthodox liturgy in which Mary “Stood aloof, and looking at the speaker through the corner of her eye.”¹⁷⁰

The viewer perceives that a dialogue has begun between the archangel and the young woman not by the movements of the lips, but through expressive gestures. This effect is masterfully produced by the dynamism of the scene and the actions involving the characters. In contrast with the flat and front-viewed figures depicted by various contemporary post-Byzantine paintings, Theophanes portrays the protagonists in profile, and shows realistic twisting movements that highlight pictorial depth of field, motion of the actors, and transitive situation. We fully understand why the Byzantine Church calls the Annunciation also “the greeting of the angel.”

Since the painting sets the initial instants of the encounter, there is no trace of insemination through the words of the archangel. The nature of the declaration is verbal, but not yet seminal. However, the right hand of Gabriel is outstretched in a gesture of greeting, as we have maintained, but also of blessing: two bent fingers (thumb and ring finger) to symbolize the two natures of Christ, the other three extended to represent the mystery of the Holy Trinity (Figure 11).

¹⁷⁰ Chrysostom 1986.

As in similar paintings, the voice of the herald is expressed by its right hand and, in particular, from the index finger. The divine command is inescapable. It is vehicled by the beam of light that spurs vertically from the angelic fingertips to descend towards the right ear of Virgin Mary after passing through the Artemis' roomy ear, the forerunner of the *Theotókos*. The Christian incarnation by ear is mediated and indicated by the organ of the pagan goddess, and it is not incidental that the cavity in the center of the pavilion has a vulva shape. The Cretan painter does not limit the representation of the *conceptio per aurem* disclosing the triad beam-dove-Mary's ear, as usually depicted in other aural *Evangelismos*. He also did not focus the scene on the message or on the means, but on the recipient, the involved organ fixed during the insemination process. The Annunciation—the passage of the “Word of God”—is literally staged as a divine impregnation.¹⁷¹

The fresco is based on two actions expressing the double significance of the gesture made by the archangel's right hand: greeting/tranquillizing and blessing/impregnating. In the first, Mary is distracted from the farewell with Artemis by the unexpected arrival and salutation of the stranger. In the second, she is bombarded by fertilizing rays and impregnated through the organ of reference: the ear. This is the very moment of insemination through the word. The angel's voice, as well as the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove riding on a directional beam, can only reach the natural place for a *virgo* who must remain *intacta*. As annotated by Angeline Lafauchais, this type of insemination gives the status, not of an actual virgin, but of a half-virgin (or anti-virgin): deflowered ear, but spared intact for sex. Her virginity *per aurem* is an antiphrasis from which her infertility emerges. She is not the pro-creator of the child. She is content with producing it.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Byrne and McNary-Zak 2009: 158.

¹⁷² Lafauchais 2007.

Three characters to narrate two stories

What had Mary and Artemis just confabulated? The painter represents the dramatic but not violent moment (according to Athos auto-mythology) when Mary takes the place of Artemis in the government of *Agion Oros*. The fresco, based on the dynamics among three players, combines two myths: on the one side, the Annunciation-Incarnation, on the other side, the most important foundational tradition of Mount Athos, in which the protagonist is the Mother of God on a missionary journey to the peninsula.

According to the collection of legendary texts on the early days of monastic life on the Holy Mountain synthesized in the early XIV century MS Codex 198 held at Dochiariou monastery,¹⁷³ Mary landed by mistake there, due to violent storm winds. It happened in the year 52 CE,¹⁷⁴ shortly after the resurrection of Jesus. She was accompanied by St. John the Divine and others. Their intention was to sail directly home to Ephesus from Cyprus¹⁷⁵ where she met the Bishop Lazarus, formerly exiled from the kingdom of the dead.¹⁷⁶ Looking around, she fell in love with the peninsula, “despite the fact that the inhabitants were pagans,”¹⁷⁷ to the point of proposing to her son in heaven: “It's too beautiful. Please, donate it to me. I want it all to myself. I do not want share it with other women. It will become a sacred garden inhabited by only men consecrated to God and his mother.”¹⁷⁸ A voice from heaven ratified the covenant and solemnly decreed that

¹⁷³ Smyrnakis 1903: 8; Papaggelos, Paliompeis 2006: 55.

¹⁷⁴ Holy Apostles Convent 1989: 436.

¹⁷⁵ According to the legend collected by the archaeologist Sotiris Kadas (1997: 10), the Madonna was instead on her way to visit Lazarus in Cyprus.

¹⁷⁶ It is captivating to note that the trip made by Virgin Mary to visit Lazarus on Cyprus is recorded also by the *Synaxarion of Orthros* on the feast day of Lazarus.

¹⁷⁷ Holy Apostles Convent 1989: 436

¹⁷⁸ According to the MS Codex 198 at Dochiariou monastery, Mary prayed for long ending by saying “this is my inheritance, by my Son and my God.”

the place was the “property and garden of the Virgin” and that it would be transformed then and forever as a safe haven for men who seek the salvation of their soul with Marian support.¹⁷⁹ “The Virgin then brought to mind the words of the archangel Gabriel, who told her some twenty years earlier, after the Pentecost, that her lot would be a Macedonian peninsula, Mount Athos.”¹⁸⁰ Once she acquired the land, Mary asked to turn the boat and went back home.

A different Athonite narrative, set in the Lavriotiki codes L. 66 and L. 31 (held in the Library of the Great Lavra), denies the contingency of a storm. These manuscripts also belong to the XIV century. They explain that Mary had been forced to take a trip to Athos. When the Apostles gathered after the Ascension of Christ and divided the lands to be evangelized, she had reserved Georgia¹⁸¹ for herself. Nevertheless, the choice was not consistent with the plans of her Son, who sent the archangel Gabriel to change her mind, promising her that “Mount Athos shall be blessedly illuminated in the light of Your face.”¹⁸² It was Wednesday, April 6, at about nine o'clock in the morning, according to the apocryphal *Armenian Gospel of Infancy*.

The project to transform a region rich in cities, harbors, temples, fortresses, and monuments into a spiritual playground for the exclusive use of men arriving from abroad was not met with enthusiasm by the local population (considered by the monks to be merely “pagan tribes”).¹⁸³ Still now, the black angels resolutely deny the forced colonization, mystifying historical events, and justifying abuses of power with divine will. According to pious and

undocumented Athonite tales,¹⁸⁴ at the disembarkation of Mary on the shores of the peninsula, the ground shook. All pagan statues in the temples started simultaneously to scream in panic, and spontaneously broke into pieces. The giant statue of Zeus placed on top of the Mountain shattered into fragments with the sound of thunder as well as the other images of pagan gods. On the summit of the mountain, the trees and houses were bent by a mysterious force in the direction where the Mother of God set foot on the peninsula, to honor her.¹⁸⁵ As the idols were collapsing, the “demons inhabiting them” boomed: “All Apollo’s practitioners are invited down to Cemes harbor to welcome the Mother of the Great God Jesus, Mary.”¹⁸⁶ In fact, in Akte there was an important sanctuary of the twin brother of Artemis. So all the priests marveled and rushed to the port respectfully asking Mary the latest news about the great mystery of the Incarnation of her son.¹⁸⁷ She began to preach the gospel like an apostle and converted the entire population. “The pagan priests admired that she, despite she was a Hebrew woman, could talk and catechize them in a great Greek,” an Athonite black angel explained to me, stressing both *Hebrew* and *woman*.¹⁸⁸ The earthquake certainly made the locals compliant to the religion of the newcomers. Mary was the founder of the

¹⁷⁹ “That is why everyone justly calls it our Virgin Mary’s Garden and Orchard,” assures Kaesarius Dapontes (quoted by Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) (1969).

¹⁸⁰ Holy Apostles Convent 1989.

¹⁸¹ It was called Iberia at that time.

¹⁸² Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1969: 39.

¹⁸³ Holy Apostles Convent 1989.

¹⁸⁴ MS Codex 198 at Dochiariou monastery. I resume the information on the topic from several interviews to the monks done by the author during three sojourns at Mount Athos in 2009-2011. See also the narration of the ‘providential’ discovery of Mount Athos by *Panagia* in Holy Apostles Convent (1989: 436).

¹⁸⁵ Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) (1969: 38) quotes on this phenomena the book *Amartolon Sotiria (Sinner’s Salvation)* by the Cretan teacher Agapios.

¹⁸⁶ Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) (1969: 39).

¹⁸⁷ “The natives diligently pose questions concerning the mystery of providence in the divine incarnation” (Holy Apostles Convent 1989: 436).

¹⁸⁸ It is not a mere personal opinion of a single monk. “The natives ... wondered at how she, an Hebrew women, explained everything to them in the Greek language” (Holy Apostles Convent 1989: 436).

Athonite Church, having consecrated with her hands the first bishop, among those in her traveling party, to guide the novel converts to Christianity.

If the contact with the locals was this sugary, one could not explain the sequel of the story as handed down by another legend of the Athonite fathers. It assures that about three centuries later the Mother of God appeared in person in a dream to Constantine the Great, whose fresh conversion had made him eager to be helpful. She ordered him to vacate the (now) illegal natives from Mount Athos because it was owned by her. Their resistance was crushed by the army and forced hunger. Each town was razed, any place of worship was destroyed, and the peninsula was cleared of its the inhabitants. The families were relocated to the wild mountains of Pindos, next to the current border between Greece and Albania or, according to other Athonite sources, to the deserted mountains of the Peloponnese. The men capable to hold a weapon were sent to Asia, to die against the Persian army.¹⁸⁹ It was the revival of the tragedy of 324: after the imperial declaration of Christianity as the only official religion of the Empire, in Didyma (Asia Minor) the oracle of the God Apollo, that played a part in the last persecution of the Christians, was sacked and the pagan priests were tortured to death. The Christians succeeded in destroying what Persians, Gauls, Cilician pirates, and Goths had failed to destroy. After taking command of Didyma, the Milesian Christians built a basilica in the *adyton* of Apollo's temple.¹⁹⁰

At *Agion Oros*, the change in land use, the evacuation of residents, their forced transfer and the destruction of the settlements in which they lived were the basis for the edification of new

¹⁸⁹ Constantine the Great is claimed as the man responsible for the deserting of the region in *Historic Logos*, a document from the monastery of Konstamonitou 1978: 30, note 28-30. Porphyry Uspenskij asserts that: "As many historians claim during his reign Constantine the Great sent away the population of Tzakonites to Peloponnesus" (1884: 136).

¹⁹⁰ Fontenrose 1988: 25.

buildings to be assigned to the newcomers. According to the Athonite historical convention, the emperor Constantine the Great built three major monasteries/forts: Constamonitou, Protaton, and Vatopedi. The divine gift of the peninsula to the Mother of Christ and the repressive intervention of emperor Constantine are legends with faint documental support, being the historical product of a tradition that was created not earlier than the XVI century. Nonetheless, the monks defend them pretending not to notice that the price of their credulity is the election of cruelty and injustice at the foundation of their monasticism. It is noteworthy that, as admitted by monk Theoktistos Docheiaritis, there is a "void . . . of information on the inhabitants of Athos during that highly significant turning point, i.e., the transition from the ancient world to the Christian one."¹⁹¹ The monks are conscious of rooting their legitimacy in the blood (of others). However, the temptation is irresistible to legitimize the sublime anachronism of a Christian Orthodox theocratic republic, not from humble origins linked to the slow settlement of anonymous and unsociable hermits, but as the fulfillment of a promise pronounced by Christ to his Mother and implemented by the first Christian emperor.

In order to find a third way between the chronicle assuring an enthusiastic demolition of the sacred pagan buildings by the recently converted pre-Christians to express the new faith and the brutal imposition of Christianity through destruction and massacres, it was also maintained that the early hermits colonized an empty savage region. It was the same space in the wild which had been sternly protected by Artemis from human intrusions. The small cities that had developed in the peninsula of Athos were all deserted or extinguished in the very first centuries of Christianity.¹⁹² Athonite tradition lists a long series of demolishers. In 348 BCE, King Philip II of Macedonia captured

¹⁹¹ Monk Theokistos Docheiaritis 2006: 90.

¹⁹² Papachrysanthou 1992: 24.

the city of Olynthus dispersing the entire population.¹⁹³ The Roman dominance, started in 168 BCE, was a period of general decline for the region.¹⁹⁴ A series of raids and the settlements of the Goths caused, in the III century, sufferance to Mount Athos and the territory around.¹⁹⁵ The massive invasion of the Slavic tribes annihilated any remnants of civil life on Mount Athos in the V century. Devastating was the attack of the nomadic Huns in the VI century.¹⁹⁶

How to explain the presence of opposite Athonite lore concerning the origin of the monastic enclave? Theophanes painted the Salutation at the mid-XVI century when the polarized narratives were established. It was a tragic period in which Athos started to rewrite its own history in response to the decline induced by the Ottoman occupation. The revised autobiography exhibited a long and illustrious lineage projected back even to the first apostolic period. It also boasted famous and miracle-working saints as founders of monasteries and multiplied the wonder-working icons of the *Panagia*. Historical inaccuracies, logical inconsistencies, and chronological contradictions were secondary to the urgent need to reaffirm a past glory and regain the lost prestige in Oriental Christianity. Theophanes' wall paintings at the Great Lavra, the Salutation as well as the coeval portraits in monumental style of the Greek philosophers, play a significant role in the new ideological Post-Byzantine framework. Having mere short passages in manuscripts as competitors benefitting the anti-intellectual attitude of the Athonite monasticism,¹⁹⁷ Theophanes' large fresco cycles at the Great Lavra acquired a leading role in iconographically promoting *Agion Oros* as a cultural engine of the Orthodox Church fueled

by ancient Greek legacy. They manifest both a blending of Christianity and ancient Hellenistic culture and the continuous presence of the seminal Greek milieu throughout the monastic centuries. They also assure that the theocratic enclave gained the legacy of antiquity without traumatized discontinuities. The substitution of the Greco-Roman population with religious practitioners who immigrated from abroad, the passage from paganism to Christianity, the absorption by Mary of the attributes and rituals of the local Artemis, and the replacement of pagan sanctuaries with monasteries were not considered *manu militari* events.

Finally, Theophanes' frescoes put the Great Lavra under the shelter of the Madonna after her replacement of Artemis. The Virgin has occupied a special place at *Agion Oros* since the debut of the monastic life there. She appeared around 840 in a dream to Peter, the first documented hermit, to prophesy the bright future of the Holy Mountain, according to the biography of the saint written two centuries later. She appeared miraculously several times during the subsequent centuries. However, she was enrolled as a protector, guardian and owner of the Hellenic religious spiritual peninsula in consequence of the historical complexity and difficulties of the ungrateful XVI century.

Which role is Artemis asked to perform within this mytho-historical framework? The pagan sculpture of a monumental ear dedicated to the pagan goddess appears in the center of the Christian representation of the Annunciation, because it is the seal to guarantee authenticity of a dramatic synchronism. It is the coming into existence of the predestined moment in which Virgin Mary at one time is mysteriously fertilized by ear, and at the same time nonviolently replaces Artemis as the celestial patron and protectress of the Holy Mountain. The monks are even sure of what Artemis is saying when she "symbolically abandons her crown for the Madonna": "as a precursor of God's Mother, I no longer hold any place here, since the Lady and patron of Athos has

¹⁹³ Martin 1981; Borza 1992; Riginos 1994.

¹⁹⁴ Papazoglu 1957: 303 ff., 357.

¹⁹⁵ Stein vol. I, 1959: 191, 193, 194, 228, 229, 362; vol. II, 1949: 12-14, 18, 309.

¹⁹⁶ Millet 1905: 63.

¹⁹⁷ Nagy 2001: 86.

come.”¹⁹⁸ The “immense”¹⁹⁹ ear of Artemis and her portrait positioned in an outstanding position corroborate the connection between the entry of Christianity at *Agion Oros*, by means of an apostolic mission of the *Theotókos*, and the presence of the pre-Christian goddess cult.

The coeval portraits in monumental style of the Greek philosophers and the Sibyl

Theophanes portrayed ancient Greek philosophers on the internal walls of the refectory of the Great Lavra during the same period he frescoed the Annunciation as further evidence of Christian legacy from ancient classicism. At first sight, the representation of secular philosophers correlated with the Salutation seems to indicate a major debt of Christian theological substance to their teachings.²⁰⁰ The chronicling of the possession of the peninsula by the Christians preserves their good conscience by trivializing the colonization of a Great Frontier as though there was no obstruction from resistant native residents. The appearance of wise men of ancient Greece on the refectory walls reflects their exploitation. The Tree of Jesse is also depicted, indicating the regal pedigree of Jesus and the distinct moment when the philosophers hold their on hands the scrolls quoting their texts, foretelling the advent of Christ.²⁰¹ For example, Plato is forced to guarantee, “God was, is and will be. He is without beginning or end.” Aristotle is compelled to assure, “The light of the Holy Trinity will shine on all creation and God will destroy man-made idols once and forever.” The prohibition to portray any woman, even the Sibyl (the Ethiopian prophetess) is bypassed, and she is asked to confirm that, “He shall be crucified by the unbelieving Jews. Blessed those

who listen to Him, woe to those who do not listen.”²⁰² It is significant to note that if the philosophers predict the coming of the Saviour, the Sibyl announces his death and her divining does not include any notation concerning the resurrection.

The wise men of antiquity, plus the Sibyl, are not the only representations of this kind illustrated by Theophanes on Mount Athos. He realized a similar wall painting at the refectory of Stavronikita monastery in 1546.²⁰³ If his frescoes are the earliest on Mount Athos, other three similar representations are known. Four Sibyls at Vatopedi monastery were painted in 1643 and destroyed shortly before 1848.²⁰⁴ Seven wise men were portrayed in 1683 in the narthex of the *Panagia Portaitissa* chapel at Iviron monastery. Five philosophers and Sibyl have been depicted by Nikephoros in 1858 on the ceiling of the entrance pavilion at Vatopedi monastery within a complex composition that is a sort of *magnificat* of the Virgin, patron of the monastery. In the last instance, pagan philosophers and the Sibyl are symbolically positioned on the bases of the arches that support the dome of the building.

In brief, both Theophanes’ frescoes at the Great Lavra have the same subject: the *form* of the incarnation and nativity of the Logos. Whereas the philosophers represent groups wearing the uniforms of high court officials, are crowned and are positioned close to the saints on the very soil out of which the Tree of the father of King David grows, Artemis is modestly dressed, standing alone in the background. She is portrayed as a defeated, although not humiliated ruler after removal. However, the philosophers, coeval to her reign, acquired noble garments and high position in the subsequent Christianity, not because they are considered wise and admirable personages from antiquity by the Athonite fathers, personifying the coexistence of different

¹⁹⁸ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 20.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 19.

²⁰⁰ Mylona, Papaggelos 2006: 250.

²⁰¹ Dionysios (of Fourni), Hetherington 1974. See the interpretation of the prototype of philosophers-prophets under the Tree of Jesse, experimented in 1144 at Saint-Denis and then replicated a Chartres, in Male 1973.

²⁰² Mylona and Papaggelos 2006: 253.

²⁰³ Chatzidakis 1986.

²⁰⁴ Uspenskij, vol. II 1877.

intellectual and spiritual values, or the coupling of Greek culture and Christianity. They have been extracted from their original milieu and valorized, with their religious, moral and social values altered in order to serve an active role in the Christian world.²⁰⁵ Solon, Socrates, and others have been elevated to the status of Christian prophets who prepared humankind for the message of the Gospel, as proponents of a supposed Greek philosophical monotheism and as erudite agents in the spreading of the Christian religion.²⁰⁶ The presence of the philosophers has roots in apocryphal non-biblical literature such as the *Prophecy of the Seven Wise Men*. The text was generally attributed to Apollonius (first century CE), but was actually redacted by Parsino the Greek in 1344. According to it, they met in an “Athenian temple” to find out the meaning of the phrase “to an unknown God.”

The works of these philosophers were known at the time on Mount Athos. Libraries of monasteries conserved numerous manuscripts, both texts and commentaries, as evidence of intellectual interest by the monks in these ancient Greek figures. For example, the nature of light in the studies of the Athonite monk Gregory Palamas, whose theology is a point of reference in the Orthodox Church, is widely in debt—even in its mistakes—to the teachings of Greek philosophers such as Plato, Plotinus, Proclus and Dionysius. The theological pillar concept of uncreated light and the related mysticism of the Hesychasm were set up by Palamas from the idea of light as a metaphor and symbol that he derived from the doctrines of the aforementioned sages, in particular from the mystical philosophy of Dionysius.²⁰⁷ Several fathers of the Church were evidently aware of the Greek philosophers, because they adapted their intellectual arsenal (language, conceptual tools and thought processes) as an aid to explicate Christian precepts to the pre-Christian

audience so they could better understand. From this point of view, it was argued that some Greek scholars were able to deduce the principles inherent in Christian theology before they were fully revealed by Christ. Such a Christian-centric position is much less instrumental than the reductive attitude of Theophanes forcing them to be clairvoyants of the advent of Christ. However, the sentiment of the Cretan monk-painter was in great fashion during the Renaissance and made popular the images of the legendary Prophetesses of the ancient classical world.²⁰⁸

Virgin Mary as the abbess of Mount Athos and Artemis of Akte

According to Theophanes’ Post-Byzantine ideological program, the fortified medieval architectural complex stylized in the background of the Salutation possibly describes the monastery of Great Lavra equalized to the temple of Jerusalem that appears as a backdrop in several Byzantine Annunciations. The fresco on the facade of the refectory of the Great Lavra probably refers to a legend concerning the foundation of this monastery as the first and most important established on Mount Athos. This pious tradition is related to the institution of the entire monastic peninsula as the exclusive “garden of *Panagia*.” The identity between the color of the coat of Virgin Mary and the roofs protecting the religious settlement indicates that the monks identify her more as their abbess than as the Mother of God enthroned in the glory of heaven (Figure 12). It is worth stressing that

²⁰⁵ Santarelli 2009: 30.

²⁰⁶ Mylona and Papaggelos 2006: 262.

²⁰⁷ Koutras 1993.

²⁰⁸ Limiting to the Renaissance paintings of sibyls foreseeing the advent of Christ, I mention some that are coeval with Theophanes activity. They have been realized by Andrea Castagno (c. 1421–1457) in Villa Carducci next to Florence, Pinturicchio (1454–1513) in the Borgia apartments of the Vatican, Michelangelo (1475–1564) on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Raphael (1483–1520) in Saint Mary of the Peace, Giacomo della Porta (c. 1533–1602) in the Saint House at Loreto, and Domenichino (1581–1641) at The Borghese Gallery.



Figure 12: Great Lavra monastery as a fortified medieval architectural complex ruled by Virgin Mary, its abbess.

Mary is not depicted as full of Hellenic beauty and spiritual grace expressing the transcendental meaning of the incarnation of Christ as her son and the Son of God. Unlike most of the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Annunciations, she is not expressing oriental spirituality and perfection by wearing clothes with brilliant and golden colors signifying deification and regality and she has no stars on her head or shoulders as a symbol of her inviolable and eternal purity. The *Theotókos* portrayed by Theophanes expresses more womanly grace than spiritual inspiration, as though she does not yet know her role in the history of human salvation. She, who has renounced the world, is simply the powerful abbess of the Great Lavra monastery and of the entire *Agion Oros*.

Mary is holding her right hand over her chest, not to humbly receive and willingly accept the angelical message concerning her new role as virgin-mother, as on the Episcopal throne of Archbishop Maximianus in Ravenna.²⁰⁹ She is slightly raising her right hand to express surprise and to keep Gabriel at distance, but also to show the external observer a magnificent ring with a red gem that is actually a ring-seal of authority. An attitude of

passive obedience in front of a celestial ambassador would not suit her.

We understood here another important reason why the Cretan monk-painter recycled a large pagan votive ear invoking the favor of Artemis: he translated the symbolism of protective listening of the pagan goddess to the *Panagia* as the abbess responsible for the Great Lavra and the entire Mount Athos. We can therefore corroborate the aforementioned second bridge between Artemis and the Madonna concerning the attribute of *Epekoos*. Theophanes expressed a general feeling of the Athonite monks. According to their observance, the Blessed Virgin is not the closer advocate of humanity to the ear of God, but a miracle-working figure to whose ear they ask for mercy and to be saved. They feel sheltered by the Mother of God.

Virgin Mary is a ubiquitous and overactive monarch of *Agion Oros*, to the point that several monasteries recognize her icons as their abbess. This is the instance of the Virgin *Tricherousa* (one with “the three hands”) for Chilandari. This icon was transported by St. Sava while returning from a pilgrimage to Palestine in 1233, and placed by Serbian monks on the iconostasis of the main church. On three subsequent mornings, however, it was found enthroned on the seat of the *igumen*, the superior of the monastery. Since then, the *Panagia Tricherousa* is the head of Chilandari, which consistently does not elect an abbot but a deputy one. The Mother of God became the treasurer of the Great Lavra after a miraculous apparition appeared to its founder.

Two sacred images portray Mary as Mother Superior of the theocratic republic of monks. In both the instances, she is without the child, to focus on her honorable and burdensome responsibility. This is an almost unique case in the Oriental Church. In the first icon, the Blessed Virgin wears monastic robes and is in heaven supported by a cloud that surrounds the top of her mount-garden. The four evangelists are depicted on her mantle, which is

²⁰⁹ Charalampidis 2007: 27.

the source of their narrations. The star on her forehead and the two on her shoulders indicate her virginity before, during, and after the mundane passage of Jesus. Her aforementioned arrival to *Agion Oros* due to a storm is illustrated on the right corner at the bottom of the icon. The second icon of Mary as the abbess of Mount Athos is kept in the small dependency of St. Nicholas. Wrapped in a red cloak, she towers over her mountain-garden. The sky is free of clouds and has a golden color.

The Blessed Virgin in the role of prioress is not only depicted in the icons by the inspired subjectivity of the painters. The monks are sure that she was even photographed. It happened on 21 August 1903, while the poor monks received alms at the gate of Saint Panteleimon monastery, which numbered more than 1400 practitioners at that time. When the photograph taken by Father Gabriel was developed, the Mother of God miraculously appeared on the left of the image. She was dressed as the abbess, but her body is stooped as a humble beggar to receive a piece of blessed bread. A few days earlier, some brothers had glimpsed her wandering among the monks at the gate.

Theophanes' vision of Virgin Mary as the abbess of Mount Athos gives the opportunity to an elderly iconographer monk I have interviewed to establish a fourth significant parallel between Mary and Artemis. The Mother of God rules and supports monks in their ascetic struggle from materiality to the divine according to heavenly guidelines. In the same way, the Greek goddess who personifies the wildness of nature governs over the most primitive forces that are beyond the control of human beings, and those laws can be violated without knowing them. In particular, she regulates the supply of game.²¹⁰ Both the patroness and ruler goddesses require dedications and sacrifices from the faithful. It is interesting to note that Artemis insisted on strict discipline among youths trained in hunting and against undue savagery in



Figure 13: A young female figure (Artemis according to the monks tradition) caught in the act of leaving the scene.

warfare, as already observed.²¹¹ It was Artemis, the goddess who protected women and children, who paradoxically demanded the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia.²¹²

If Theophanes depicts Artemis in his fresco (Figure 13) to illustrate the pious legend of the goddess surrendering Akte–*Agion Oros* to Virgin Mary, why does he assume her and not another pagan divinity as the precursor of the Mother of God? Her cult was a point of reference in the pagan divine in female being more widespread than those of any other Greek goddess, extending from Massilia (modern Marseilles) to southern Italy, to mainland Greece, North Africa, and Ephesus in Asia Minor.²¹³ However, we have already noticed as more significant the convergences the Cretan

²¹⁰ Larson 2007: 102.

²¹¹ Vernant 1987; Davidson and Chaudhri 1993: 154.

²¹² Tolpin 1969.

²¹³ Larson 2007: 101.

painter establishes between the two goddesses on the bases of the duality virginity-motherhood, the aspect of protective divinity with shielded listening, the attribute of giving life, death and regeneration, and the ability to rule. However, are there other convergences rooted into the distinct Athonite territory? Which role did the monk-painter shape for Artemis in the Athonite narration of the ultra-mundane beginning of the human life of Christ and the untouched purity of the Virgin Mother?

Artemis is at home in Mount Athos, and particularly in the Great Lavra. In his exhaustive textual and field research on *Agion Oros*, Gerasimos Smyrnakis notes that probably “a temple dedicated to Artemis had stood” near the refectory of the monastery.²¹⁴ The historian monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) of the Great Lavra translates the assumption into certainty, citing the presence of a shrine consecrated to a “rural Diana.”²¹⁵ He recognized that the plaque with inscription dedicated by the priestess Neuris probably arrived from there.

The main church of the Great Lavra was built on a pagan temple. The Athonite fathers placed pell-mell a number of sarcophagi, capitals, altars, tiles, and fragments of columns under the porch of the refectory that is situated below the Salutation and near it, as if it was the outside warehouse of an archaeological museum (Figure 14). They also positioned the capitals turned upside down and at the bottom of the columns due to disinterest and ignorance for classical antiquity that preceded them. Perhaps, the abhorrence to those ‘godless and immoral finds’ led them (Figure 15).

Priestesses dedicated to the worship of Artemis *Agrotera* were the residents of a fortified city in the Akte peninsula, called Akraothos (Akrothool), according to the majority of historians²¹⁶ or Ouranopolis in accord with

others.²¹⁷ The temple-town dedicated to Artemis had “its own regime and government . . . It had its strict rules and its own coinage.”²¹⁸ Indeed, the area was known from immemorial time for the deep and untamed forests where ferocious and sturdy wild boars lived, as stated in *On Animals* by Aristotle.²¹⁹ Both virgin nature and wild boars are the traditional realm and favorite animals of the young and strong She-of-the-Wild, the Huntress.



Figure 14: Pre-Christian architectural fragments under the porch below the Salutation and near it, as if it was the outside warehouse of an archaeological museum.

Artemis was among the goddesses with ancient pre-Indo-European roots worshiped within the Greek pantheon such as Athena, Hestia, Aphrodite, and Hera.²²⁰ The emergences from Mount Athos point on how long alive was this generative aspect that Artemis inherited from the Paleolithic and Neolithic stratum of feminine divinized that gives life to all nature. The bridge was constituted by the Minoan and Mycenaean *Potnia Thêrôn* (“Mistress of wild animals,” and the “Stag huntress” in *Homeric Hymns and Iliad*)²²¹ as well as the pre-Greek

²¹⁴ Smyrnakis 1903: 391.

²¹⁵ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19-20.

²¹⁶ Homer, *Iliad* 21.471; Xenophon, *Cynegeticus* 6.13 in Paap 1970; Bacchylides 1961: 11.37-42.

²¹⁷ Monk Spyridon Lavraeotis (Kambanaos) 1930: 19-20.

²¹⁸ Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1973: 26.

²¹⁹ Louis 1968: 607a.9, 607.a13.

²²⁰ Haarmann 1998: 21.

²²¹ Homer *Iliad* 21.470-71; Gimbutas, Robbins Dexter 1999: 156.



Figure 15: Capitals turned upside down at the bottom of the columns that support the porch below the Salutation.

“deer-killing” Taurian goddess by the later name of *Parthenos* mentioned by Euripides in his *Iphigenia in Tauris*.²²² The Ephesian Artemis, as the successor of Cybele in western Asia, is considered to be the daughter of the Great Goddess.²²³ As inheritor of the prehistoric youthful Birth and Life-Giving Goddess, Artemis never acquired features of an Indo-European divinity, nor was she married to a god. She assumed, instead, the title of *Queen*, as maintained by Herodotus.²²⁴ Mycenaean Linear B tablets from Pylos record the name Artemis as *A-ti-mi-te*, *A-ti-mi-to*.²²⁵ The word *A-te-mo* occurs at Knossos.²²⁶ Artemis, in her role as

Mistress of the Animals, has her residence and roving in the wild mountain environment unspoiled by humans, which was characteristic of the pagan Akte and the monastic Mount Athos. She and her sanctuaries stand at the borders, both conceptually and physically, between the wilderness and civilized life, typical of remote and isolated monasteries.

The *Agion Oros* case study corroborates the strong and durable, even if subterranean, *file rouge* established among female divinities who contain their own life source:²²⁷ the Neolithic Birth and Life-Giver, the Aegean Bronze Age *Potnia Thêrôn*, and the “deer-killing” Taurian goddess,²²⁸ the Hellenic Artemis *Agrotera*, and finally, the Christian Virgin Mary.²²⁹ The fresco at the Great Lavra is a representative case in which the fervent veneration of the Virgin Mary has deep roots in ancient Old Europe where the sacred womb has been revered for thousands of years.

In the seventh book of Strabo (c. 63 BCE–21 CE) the town sacred to Artemis *Agrotera* is placed near the peak of the sacred mountain.²³⁰ Father Andreas from Simonopetra, formerly secretary of the Athos Holy Community, situates it around the southern edge of the peninsula. He also maintains to have seen its coin with Artemis seated on a globe, ready to shoot an arrow.²³¹ The *Decree of the Akrothoans*, found in the area of the Agia Anna

²²⁷ Gimbutas 1989: 87.

²²⁸ “The image of a divinity might be seen as combining both pre-Greek and Greek traits.” Artemis “in her role of ‘Mistress of Animals’ suggests a pre-Hellenic mother-goddess; but as ‘Huntress’ she appears to be an unadulterated product of the Greek newcomers” (Zaidman and Pantel 1992: 5)

²²⁹ The prehistoric female divinities had parthenogenetic (self-generating) potency. The Christian Virgin Mary is a demoted version of this original self-fertilizing “Virgin Goddess” (Gimbutas 1991: 223).

²³⁰ Strabo vol. 2 (Lib. 7-12) (1969): 7a.131.1–7a.131.9; 7a.1.32.1–7a.1.32.14.

²³¹ Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1973: 26.

²²² Diehl (1949) 1957- 1967; Bilde 2003: 169.

²²³ Haarmann 1996: 116 ff.

²²⁴ Gimbutas 1989: 87, 318.

²²⁵ Chadwick 1976: 89; Burkert 1985: 85-86; Gimbutas, Robbins Dexter 1999: 156.

²²⁶ Chadwick et al. 1986.



Figure 16: Part of an ancient Greek stone altar for bull sacrifice next to the Great Lavra.

Skete in 1845,²³² gives historical substance to the memory of the city ruled by a virgin priestess. It registered the tribute of this city from Akte peninsula to the coffers of the Attic–Delian Alliance.²³³ Unfortunately, the inscription is lost, having been transferred as early as 1877 to Crimea by Porphyry Uspenskij.²³⁴ It happened under the indifference of the monks for a pre-Christian vestige. Although any visitor can admire it in the Odessa museum, for the Athonite monks it is officially “purloined by unknown persons.”²³⁵ Concerning the location of the ancient settlement, Ioakeim Papaggelos and Stefanos Paliompeis pointed out that it would be difficult for a city to survive in the rough terrain in the neighborhood of the Agia Anna Skete. The only position suitable for anchorage and with enough arable land that accomplishes these coordinates to a settlement is under the foundations of the Great Lavra and the Salutation frescoed by Theophanes.²³⁶ Monk Andreas adds that mainly girls dedicated to the goddess lived in the remote town of Akraothos. They attended a training course on

²³² Smyrnakis 1903: 12; Uspenskij vol. 1 (1877): 42 ff.; Hatzopoulos 1996, Epigraphic Appendix: 62, n. 43; Paliompeis 2006: 104.

²³³ Meritt, Wade-Gery, and McGregor 1939: 225, 264 ff., 286 ff., 314, 360 ff., 464.

²³⁴ Uspenskij vol. 3 (1884): 42 ff.; Papaggelos and Paliompeis 2006: 58.

²³⁵ Smyrnakis 1903: 12.

²³⁶ Papaggelos and Paliompeis 2006: 58.



Figure 17: A Roman sundial with a central hole for inserting the shaft in the area of the Great Lavra.

the sacred feminine being destined to become high priestesses to serve and govern “idolatrous” temples throughout Greece.²³⁷ Men were forbidden access to the temple-town of Akraothos under penalty of death. The monks’ tradition later asserts that these young virgins, consecrated to the goddess Artemis, in training on the job, were mostly residents of Akte, sent there from all parts of Greece for this purpose.²³⁸

The vast architectural complex of the Great Lavra was therefore erected utilizing elements of an ancient city as readily available construction material. In the locality of Mellana, just a few dozen meters above the monastery, there are still foundations of houses and a stone altar for bull sacrifice (Figure 16) perhaps in honor of Poseidon (visited by Alain Daniélou and Jacques Cloarec with the guidance of a monk).²³⁹ A system for pressing grapes, a sundial with a central hole for inserting the shaft, and a square grid of 3x3 boxes to play Tic Tac Toe can be identified.²⁴⁰ In the same place, evidence of pre-Christians and early Christian petroglyphs can also be recognized (Figure 17).

²³⁷ Monk Andreas Simonopetritis (Theophilopoulos) 1973.

²³⁸ Holy Apostles Convent 1989.

²³⁹ Daniélou 1992: 290.

²⁴⁰ The alignment game was invented in ancient Egypt (it was incised around 1400 BCE on a slab of the ceiling from the temple of Kurna) and fascinated the inhabitants of the first city of Troy, the Greeks and the Romans.

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