

THE PERSISTENCE OF LATE ANTIQUITY:
CHRIST AS MAN AND WOMAN IN AN EIGHTH-CENTURY MINIATURE
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This brief essay, originally delivered as part of an SMFS panel at Kalamazoo, forms part of a larger project to reconstruct the intellectual culture of the eighth-century Main Valley, with a particular focus on ideas about gender.¹ The evidentiary base for the project consists entirely of manuscripts produced and/or utilized in the region at the time, above all those connected with female or double monastic houses.² The investigation so far has shown that the small, heterosocial, aristocratic Christian communities who virtually monopolized written culture at the time adjusted and interpreted the Christian traditions which they inherited so as to support their own relatively gender-egalitarian values. This effort involved the preservation (or perhaps the revival) of certain aspects of late antique Mediterranean Christian culture which were particularly conducive to gender-egalitarian values: the ideas associated with Priscillian of Avila, the ideas embodied in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, and the artistic conceptualization of Christ as androgynous. The significance, or even the mere existence, of these textual and artistic traditions during the eighth century has been neither noticed nor explored.

Eighth-century Eastern Francia was, in fact, surprisingly

like the fourth-century Mediterranean, so far as Christian authority was concerned. In both cases, certain churchmen and their allies were making significant progress towards their twin goals of establishing institutionalized Churches and orthodox dogmas, but the processes were far from complete; in some areas, they were only just beginning, often struggling against the inertial weight of traditions or against outright resistance. Everywhere they had to face the luxuriant variety of Christian forms (and of competing non-Christian cults), which were the inevitable result of the earlier absence of established religious hierarchies and orthodoxies. As it had once done in the Mediterranean, Christianity spread in "Germanic" Europe through many channels and from many sources. The numerous aristocratic monastic communities scattered along the river valleys east of the middle Rhine were free to drink at the font of (Christian) wisdom wherever they found it, unimpeded by intrusive episcopal authorities. The episcopal see erected at Würzburg sometime during the 740s was poor, weak, and itself dependent upon the aristocratic families of the region into the ninth century.

In the permissive atmosphere of the era, elite women and men could give relatively free rein to



their curiosity, and delve into areas of erudition which might—under other circumstances—have exposed them to charges of heresy or heterodoxy. One famous example of local learned accomplishment is the Anglo-Saxon missionary and relative of bishop Lull of Mainz, the *valde erudita* Berhtgyd, who appended to an octosyllabic verse of her own composition, a list of Hebrew divine and angelic names that has been interpreted as a magic spell.³ This sort of elite interest in the occult had also flourished among heterosocial aristocratic Christian ascetic communities during the fourth century, when the women and men gathered around Priscillian, bishop of Avila, acknowledged their possession of stone amulets on which were inscribed the Hebrew, Latin, and Greek names of God.⁴ That group of Spanish intellectuals also believed in the equal capacity of men and women to be vehicles of the Holy Spirit, and proudly drew spiritual nourishment from apocryphal texts such as the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, John, Andrew, and Paul and Thecla.⁵ As a result of these stances, combined with an unfortunate constellation of political and ecclesiological factors, the male and female leaders of the movement were executed, by imperial order, at Trier (385 CE). The previous year, Priscillian's *discipula* Urbica had been stoned by the *vulgus* at Bordeaux.⁶ Yet their ideas lived on, embodied in eleven apologetic tractates written to defend the

Spaniards against charges of doctrinal and practical irregularities.⁷ The sole surviving manuscript witness of those tractates was present, along with the *valde erudita* Berhtgyd, in the eighth-century Main Valley.

That manuscript is now Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek M.p.th.q. 3. It was originally produced in Italy during the fifth century, and by the eighth century had come into the possession of Bilihilt, who wrote both her own name and a memorial entry for a certain Etto in the codex. Bilihilt's handwriting was the so-called "German-Insular" script, unique to the region east of the Middle Rhine during the eighth century.⁸ In the century since the discovery and identification of the codex, there has been a mountain of scholarship on Priscillian, "Priscillianism," and the Priscillianist tractates, all of it based almost entirely on analysis of the texts in the Würzburg manuscript, and all of it concerned exclusively with Late Antiquity. To my knowledge, only Juliana Cabrera has systematically investigated the persistence of Priscillianist ideas as late as the sixth century, and even her study was confined to the Iberian Peninsula.⁹ At no point has any scholar considered the possible significance of the codex for the eighth-century woman who utilized it, or for the larger community to which she belonged.

Among the ideas to which Bilihilt and her community would have been exposed through reading

the tractates was the notion that God is masculo-feminine (*masculofemina putetur deus*). According to the apologist, however, the companions of Priscillian do not subscribe to a masculo-feminine deity, but rather choose to emphasize the presence of the divine spirit in both males and females: "nobis autem et in masculis et in feminis dei spiritus est, sicut scribuntur: fecit deus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem suam, masculum et feminam. [for the spirit of god is in us, both in males and in females, just as it is written: 'god made humanity in his image and likeness, male and female.]"¹⁰ Priscillian and his followers in fact stood accused of believing in a masculo-feminine God, and their spokesperson's defensive strategy here is astonishingly weak. Simply to juxtapose the theological teaching that God is masculo-feminine with the biblical assertion that the human image and likeness of God is both masculine and feminine, could easily convince an egalitarian-minded reader of the truth of the very proposition which the apologist presumably intended to refute. The apologist included no condemnation of the supposedly flawed view, nor did s/he even try to explain what might be incorrect about it. It is no wonder that the apologetic treatises ultimately failed to convince the authorities of the orthodoxy of Priscillian's circle, whose leaders perished under imperial orders. In a world without mechanisms

for the propagation and enforcement of orthodoxy, such as the eighth-century Main Valley, the masculo-feminine God of the Mediterranean heretics of Late Antiquity could easily win devotees in Bilihilt's circle.

Equally significant for the erudite aristocratic women of the eighth-century Main Valley (among whom I have already named Berhtgyd and Bilihilt) was the Third Apologetic Tractate, a sustained defense of the spiritual value of apocryphal texts.¹¹ The series of texts known as the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* were composed by and for communities of women, in the eastern Mediterranean, during the late second and early third century.¹² The *Apocryphal Acts* are full of images of female autonomy and spiritual authority, as well as allusions to the feminine divine and to a masculo-feminine God.¹³ They were eagerly read in Priscillianist circles. Significantly, the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* were also known and read in the Main Valley during the eighth century, possibly by Berhtgyd and Bilihilt, probably by Thecla of Kitzingen, and certainly by Guntza of Karlbürg and the other members of her scriptorium, who produced a copy of the collected *Apocryphal Acts* around the middle of the century.¹⁴ That manuscript, now Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek M.p.th.f. 78, is the oldest surviving copy of the corpus of texts as they were adapted for Latin-reading audiences.¹⁵

The Würzburg codex is, in its present state, mutilated at both ends, so we cannot know how complete the original collection was. It does not, at present, contain any version of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the dramatic story of the pair's evangelical exertions, replete with scenes of Thecla's apostolic and quasi-sacerdotal activities.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that the abbess of Kitzingen (a women's community just a short trip up the Main river from Würzburg) was named Thecla, is itself telling. During the eighth century, only a tiny segment of the Christian population was named at birth, or renamed themselves as adults, after saints; every attested example of this rare naming practice was, unsurprisingly, extremely significant.¹⁷ It seems relatively safe to posit some connection between this lone eighth-century Thecla, surrounded by bearers of "normal" names such as Berhtgyd and Bilihilt and Etto and Guntza and Lull, and the apostolic virgin of the apocryphal acts.

It is within the cultural context sketched above that we can finally make sense of a(n) (in)famous and puzzling miniature in another eighth-century German-Insular codex, namely Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek M.p.th.f. 69, a copy of the Epistles of Paul. The full-page illumination is reproduced here on p. 27. The image has seemed mysterious to art historians largely because they have never sought to understand it in its own context,

and have analyzed it iconographically without taking into account any aspect of its production or utilization. The codex is, first and foremost, a women's manuscript. It belongs to a group of manuscripts associated with the scribe Abirhilt, whose specific Main Valley community has not yet been specified, but which was certainly in contact with Karlburg and Kitzingen.¹⁸ The intellectual world in which the miniaturist of Abirhilt's community worked was one familiar with the notion of a masculo-feminine God, open to a variety of potentially unorthodox (even occult) approaches to Christian theology, and committed to the utilization of the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*. These aristocratic intellectuals were not only possessed of a copy of the *Acts* which some of them had personally produced, but also had access (in the Priscillianist tracts) to a reasoned defense of the value of such apocryphal materials.

The crucifixion miniature was originally the frontispiece of the entire codex, as is evident from the presence of a table of contents on the reverse side of the page, but was at some uncertain point moved to the middle of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, and now stands as folio 7^r. Art historians have been universally reluctant to discuss the dominating figure who, in the lower register of the image, towers over nine companions in a boat. All have agreed, without exception, that the figure is Jesus, due to the presence of the

cruciform halo; however, none have discussed the figure in more detail or commented on Jesus' startling physical transformation between the cross above and the boat below. One specialist on the early medieval art of the region has coyly noted that the image is full of magic, but has declined to explain how.¹⁹ One of the most significant aspects of the miniature is how its artist incorporated compositional elements that are typical of fifth- and sixth-century depictions of the crucifixion (the two thieves, the foot support, the allusions to the Last Judgment, and the very existence of a lower register), but which are rarely if ever found – with the exception of the Würzburg image – in seventh- or eighth-century representations of the scene.²⁰ It is, again, clear that the religious women of the eighth-century Mainland had access to, and enthusiastically embraced, late ancient Mediterranean sources, including depictions of Jesus.

I would agree that the dominating figure in the boat is Jesus, but a Jesus who is worth some exploration. As with other aspects of religious culture in the eighth-century Main valley, we can understand the crucifixion miniature better if we recognize the extent to which people were preserving (or reviving) late antique traditions, including conventions of representations of Jesus. One of the most common ways in which artists depicted Jesus during the fourth through the sixth

centuries was as a feminized, or better androgynous, figure, with a round, full, soft and beardless face, with long, flowing hair, with narrow sloping shoulders, with broad hips, with a smoothly modeled, hairless body, and sometimes even with breasts.²¹ This androgynous Christ was able to represent, to embody, to incarnate, a masculo-feminine deity.²² The thoroughly masculine figure on the cross, complete with beard and mustache, could depict the messiah as he appeared in Jerusalem in historical time, but the transcendent Christ was not limited by that human, Jewish, body.

However, to discern the intention of the artist correctly (if, indeed, I have done so) does not exhaust the topic of the identity of the blessing figure in the boat. Not every viewer is equally equipped to recognize a feminine, or androgynous, figure as a feminized Christ, rather than as a woman. Such recognition must have become increasingly difficult as the iconographic conventions of the late antique Mediterranean were replaced by new artistic traditions. The feminized Jesus does appear to have retreated from the artistic lexicon of Christian Europeans between (roughly) the ninth and the twelfth centuries. When later medieval artists did feminize Jesus, they did so in entirely novel ways, foreign to the late ancient Mediterranean, for instance by grafting onto a decidedly male body a single “feminine” characteristic, such as a

side wound pouring out nourishing liquid in the manner of a lactating breast.²³ Most later viewers would have been hard pressed to recognize the androgynous, eschatological Jesus in the boat beneath the cross. Instead, they would most likely have seen a woman, one who had disturbingly arrogated to herself iconographic attributes of Christ proper, such as the cruciform halo and the oversized blessing right hand. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century viewers have been completely blind to the gender cues of the figure, just as they have been concerning other late antique depictions of the feminized or androgynous Christ, which were initially taken, simply, for women.²⁴

The Würzburg crucifixion may even have been misunderstood by the artist's own contemporaries, many of whom may well have perceived the dominating figure in the boat to be, simply, a woman rather than an androgynous Jesus. Indeed, for many female viewers and users of the manuscript, the image of the feminine leader in the boat was consonant with their lived experiences of spiritual authority. This was particularly the case for female religious living in communities dedicated to powerful female saints such as Jesus' mother, Mary, and ruled by powerful abbesses. For those women, both their heavenly patron and their earthly *domina* in fact possessed a feminine form. It would have been easy to assimilate the crucifixion miniature to other

contemporary and near-contemporary images of Mary, and to read the blessing figure in the boat as the Virgin, the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven, or indeed as the *pia dominatrix* and *salvatrrix*. For instance, the women religious of Breedon (Leicestershire), whose community was dedicated to Mary, had their church adorned with an arched stone carving showing the (childless) Virgin as a full frontal figure with staring eyes and a disproportionately large right hand, raised in a gesture of blessing.²⁶ Veneration of Mary—as the *stella maris*, the *domina*, the potential overruler of Jesus at the Last Judgment, and much more—as an extremely important aspect of Anglo-Saxon spirituality between the late seventh and early ninth century²⁷, when the area east of the middle Rhine was constantly nourished by Anglo-Saxon immigrants and missionaries (producing, among other things, the “German-Insular script”). For many individuals trained in such an atmosphere, it would have been obvious that the “woman” in the boat was Mary.

In this brief essay, I have only been able to scratch the surface of the ways in which the Priscillianist tractates, the crucifixion miniature and the apocryphal acts illuminate the religious culture of the eighth-century Main Valley. All testify to the importance of late antique Mediterranean modes of thought and expression well into the early Middle Ages. In the loosely regu-

lated society of the eighth century, remnants of the late antique Christian imagination persisted and took on new meanings in the new context of women's monastic communities.

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ENDNOTES

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²Also see Felice Lifshitz, "Demonstrating Gun(t)za. Women, Manuscripts and the Question of Historical 'Proof,'" in *Vom Nutzen des Schreibens*, ed. Walter Pohl and Paul Herold (Vienna, 2002), pp. 67-96, and Felice Lifshitz, "Gender and Exemplarity East of the Middle Rhine: Jesus, Mary and the Saints in Manuscript Context" *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000): 325-343. The former study provides full information on all the manuscripts from the region which have been associated

with women, along with rationales for the attribution, and both contain concerted arguments for seeing the Main Valley communities as oriented towards gender egalitarianism.

³Christine E. Fell, "Some Implications of the Boniface Correspondence," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington, 1990), p. 43.

⁴Tractate I, *Priscilliani Quae Supersunt*, ed. George Schepss (CSEL 18; Vienna-Prague-Leipzig, 1889), p. 26, ll. 1-6.

⁵Tractate I, *Priscilliani Quae Supersunt*, ed. Schepss, p. 28, ll. 16-24; Henry Chadwick, "Priscillian of Avila." *The Occult and the Charismatic in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1976); pp. 8-10, 14, 20-25, 36-37; Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority and the Priscillianist Controversy* (Berkeley, 1995), *passim*; Juliana Cabrera, *Estudio sobre el Priscillianismo en la Galicia Antigua* (Published Doctoral Thesis, University of Granada, 1983); pp. 27-29, 34-35, 42, 215-223.

⁶Chadwick, *Priscillian*, p. 44.

⁷*Priscilliani Quae Supersunt*, ed. Schepss.

⁸For detailed descriptions of all the Würzburg manuscripts discussed in this essay, see Hans Thurn, *Die Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Würzburg* 2,2 (Wiesbaden, 1986). See folios A^r and 41^r of M.p.th.q.3 for Bilihilt's entries.

⁹Cabrera, *Estudio sobre el Priscillianismo*, pp. 157-198.

¹⁰Tractate I, *Priscilliani Quae Supersunt*, ed. Schepss, p. 28, ll. 15-18. Also see p. 32, ll. 6-11. Translation by the author.

¹¹Tractate III, *Priscilliani Quae Supersunt*, ed. Schepss, pp. 44-56.

¹²Stevan Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, 1980); Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (New York, 1987).

¹³Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, pp. 119-127.

¹⁴For full details on Gun(t)za and on Karlburg (a women's monastery just a few kilometers down the Main River from Würzburg), see Lifshitz, "Demonstrating Gun(t)za."

¹⁵The Latin versions of the Greek Acts appear to date from the fourth through the sixth centuries, and it is still not clear when and how they were forged into a collection. The Würzburg codex has not been studied as a whole; instead, individual texts in the collection have been edited and studied separately. See, for instance, Klaus Zelzer, ed. *Die Alten lateinischen Thomasakten* (Texte und Untersuchungen 122; Berlin, 1977), for a study of the Acts of Thomas (folios 6^r-15^v).

¹⁶For one version of the Acts of Paul and Thecla in English translation, see *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Tübingen, 1989). Translation R. McLWilson (Louisville, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 239-246.

¹⁷See Felice Lifshitz, *The Name of the Saint. The Martyrology of Jerome and Access to the Sacred*, 627/8 – 827/8 (University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming). I did not deal with Thecla of Kitzingen in this study.

¹⁸For additional information on Abirhilt and other manuscripts from her scriptorium, see Lifshitz, "Gender and Exemplarity." For the many small female and double houses in the area at the time, see Konrad Lübeck, "Fuldaer Nebenklöster in Mainfranken," *Mainfränkisches Jahrbuch* 2 (1950): pp. 1-52.

¹⁹Heinz Roosen-Runge, "Kunsterwerke der Frühzeit. Tradition und Neubeginn," in *Karolingisches Franken*, ed. Wolfgang Buhl (Würzburg, 1973), pp. 199-231, and 229-230. The fullest discussions of the image known to me are Herrad Spilling, "Irische Handschriftenüberlieferung in Fulda, Mainz und Würzburg," in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, ed. Heinz Löwe (Stuttgart, 1982) 2: 876-902 (at 899-902), and Marie-Christine Sepière, *L'Image d'un dieu souffrant (IXe – Xe siècle) Aux origins du crucifix* (Paris, 1994), pp. 116-125. Neither discusses the figure in the boat, beyond simply to say that it is Jesus.

²⁰Sepière, *L'Image d'un dieu souffrant*, pp. 116-125.

²¹Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, 1999; rev. ed.), pp. 115-141.

²²Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 138.

²³For feminized conceptualizations of Jesus in the later Middle Ages, the classic and seminal work is Caroline Walker Bynum, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing" in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 110-169.

²⁴For instance, the apse mosaic at Stonecutters' Monastery of Blessed David, Thessalonica (ca. 425 – 450 CE), whose Jesus was long interpreted as Mary, and the Statuette of a seated Jesus in the Terme Museum in Rome (c. 350 CE), long known as "the seated poetess" (Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, pp. 115-118; 128).

²⁵The latter are forms of address to Mary in a prayer included in two manuscripts of c. 800 CE, namely the Book of Nunnaminster (British Library Harley 2965) and the Book of Cerne (Cambridge University Library Ll. I.10). See Mary Clayton, *Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 96-102.

²⁶Clayton, *Cult of the Virgin*, pp. 152-153 and plate II. Clayton dates the panel to c. 800 CE; others have advocated ca. 830-840 CE. The famous (mass-produced) sixth- and seventh-century Monza and Bobbio *ampullae* (showing the Theandric over the Virgo Orans) present extraordinary parallels with the double-register composition of the Würzburg crucifix; see Andrej

Grabar, *Les ampoules de terre sainte Monza-Bobbio* (Paris, 1958), with photos by Denise Fourmont, especially Monza nos. 11 and 14, and Bobbio no. 20. There is, unfortunately, insufficient space here to explore the possible influence of the *ampullae* on how viewers interpreted the crucifixion miniature.

²⁷Clayton, *Cult of the Virgin*, p. 267 (general conclusion).

