“SHE SACRIFICED HERSELF AS THE PRIEST”

Early Christian Female and Male Co-Priests

Ally Kateusz

This essay is part 2 in a series about the early tradition that Mary, the Jewish mother of Jesus, was a priest. Part 1, “Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary’s Liturgical Leadership,” appeared in the fall 2013 Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion and was that year’s Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award First-Place Winner. The current essay illuminates an early tradition in the Life of the Virgin that the women disciples were at the Last Supper, and that both Mary and her son sacrificed as priests at the meal. Consistent with this Eucharistic model, early Christian authors in both East and West described a gender parallel co-priesthood. Confirming this co-priesthood was orthodox, the two oldest artifacts to illustrate people inside real churches depicted liturgical scenes with women and men in parallel flanking the altar—in the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Old Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

Research recently published in this journal demonstrated the unexpected ways early Christian authors of sacred texts such as the Protevangelium of James, the Six Books Dormition narrative, and the Gospel of Bartholomew portrayed Mary, the mother of Jesus, with markers of her liturgical authority.1 Typically dating from the second through fourth centuries, some may

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be based on even older traditions. For example, the Protevangelium—which depicted Mary inside the holy of holies of the Jerusalem Temple—has almost no adverse language about Jews compared to the canonical gospels, and some scholars suggest it may contain first-century traditions. The so-called Gelasian decree ordered these books burned, but they were so widely read that fragments survive in many ancient languages. Further attesting to their popularity around the Mediterranean, scenes in them have been identified among the oldest surviving Christian art, including, most recently, wall paintings in both the Dura-Europos church baptistery near Ancient Syria and the Priscilla catacomb in Rome.

These ancient authors often portrayed Mary with religious authority, such as “leading the apostles in prayer, serving in essence as their liturgical leader.” The author of the third-century Gospel of Bartholomew, for example, wrote that after her son’s ascension, Mary told the apostles, “Let us pray,” and they stood behind her. They said, “In you the Lord set his tabernacle and was pleased to be contained by you. Therefore you now have more right than we to lead in

Schrader. I also thank my favorite Orthodox scholar, Stephen J. Shoemaker, who introduced me to the Life of the Virgin, thereby sharpening my unchurched argument.

1 Ally Kateusz, “Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary’s Liturgical Leadership,” Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 29, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 75–92. Regarding this article, see also Stephen J. Shoemaker, Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 157–60, esp. 160: “If Mary’s representation in these narratives bears any relation to the roles that women played in the communities that produced and used this text, then clearly women must have served as liturgical leaders in some capacities.”


4 Schneemelcher, New Testament Apocrypha, 38–40. Note that the “Book which is called The Home-going of the Holy Mary” refers to the Dormition narrative.


prayer.” Mary raised her arms and spoke a long prayer. A broad reading across early writings about Mary reveals many markers of her priesthood:

Mary exorcising, undertaking cures, sealing, sprinkling water, baptizing women, evangelizing, teaching, going out preaching, debating priests, entering the holy of holies, setting forth the censer of incense to God, standing at the Temple altar during the Eucharist, attending the Last Supper along with other women, commissioned by Jesus in the Eucharistic priesthood, breaking the communion bread, receiving a book of mysteries, and sending women with writings to cities around the Mediterranean.

Later scribes independently censored most of these markers, and some added new markers that reconstructed Mary as a very different role model for women: silent, fearful, pure, and enclosed.

Previous research, however, has not analyzed the most remarkable scene of Mary’s priesthood, which the text of the oldest manuscript of the Life of the Virgin depicts. The Life of the Virgin is the oldest surviving narrative to detail Mary’s entire life—not only her birth and death as told in the popular Protevangelium and Dormition narratives but also an account of her activities during her son’s ministry. Its author elevated Mary and other women, describing a Second Temple Jewish community where the impulse toward gender parity was strong. For example, in contrast to Christian theologians who emphasized a chain of male apostolic authority, this author also called women “apostle” and depicted Mary Magdalene specifically “as an apostle equal in rank to Peter.”

According to the Life of the Virgin, after Jesus died, his mother herself taught these apostles and sent them forth. She had been at all her son’s healings and

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8 Kateusz, “Collyridian Déjà Vu,” 92.
9 Ibid., 80–85.
13 Life of the Virgin 96–99.
miracles, it said, and so had other women. This author called these women “disciples,” seemingly unaware—despite repeatedly quoting scripture—that the canonical gospels title no woman “disciple.” Thus, where Mark 1:29–31 depicted only male disciples at Jesus’s first healing, the Life’s author remembered only female: “When the Lord entered Peter’s house and healed his mother-in-law, who was confined to her bed because of a fever, his all-holy and blessed mother, the Virgin Mary, was with him as well as the women who had been made disciples of the Lord.” Finally, and despite that Mark and Matthew describe only twelve men at Jesus’s last supper and its all-important institution of the Eucharist, the Life of the Virgin described this hungry group like Therapeutae Jews, with both men and women at the sacred meal.

The very oldest surviving manuscript of the Life of the Virgin—the eleventh-century Old Georgian Tbilisi A-40—retained yet one more scene of gender parity. According to its text, Mary was the teacher of the women and “for this reason,” at the Last Supper, “she sacrificed herself as the priest and she was sacrificed, she offered and she was offered.” Then Jesus offered his body and blood:

She was always inseparable from the Lord and king her son, and as the Lord had authority over the twelve apostles and then the seventy, so the holy mother had over the other women who accompanied him, as the holy evangelist said, “There were there many women who followed Jesus from Galilee and who served him.” The holy Theotokos was their leader and teacher. For this reason when the great mystery, the supper, took place, she sacrificed herself as the priest and she was sacrificed, she offered and she was offered. Then the Lord Jesus presided over the twelve apostles and those he wanted, and he delivered the sublime mysteries and signs of God’s Passover, he gave them some of his precious body and blood as the bread and the drink.

In validating Tbilisi A-40’s Last Supper scene, this essay culturally contextualizes its co-priesthood of Mary and Jesus within early Christian practice around the Mediterranean. During the same era that Mary was seen as a priest, substantial evidence records that in some Christian communities women were priests.
Both literary and iconographic artifacts will show when women were priests, women and men sometimes officiated as co-priests.

The Oldest Text of the *Life of the Virgin*

Originally composed in Greek, the most ancient version of the *Life of the Virgin* survives only in an old Georgian manuscript tradition that unanimously attributed it to Maximus the Confessor (580–662), although he almost certainly was not its author.20 Perhaps his name was added to protect it, for he was revered in Georgia. Most scholars agree that the version attributed to Maximus was penned not long after the seventh-century Agar siege of Constantinople; recently, this dating was defended persuasively.21

In 1986, Michel van Esbroeck, a Jesuit scholar who had already published an Old Georgian dictionary and over two dozen Georgian texts, published the critical edition and French translation of the oldest surviving manuscript of the *Life of the Virgin*, the eleventh-century Tbilisi A-40. He apparently anticipated questions about its Last Supper scene, because he analyzed it at length, both from within the text itself and also across variants.22 For example, he noted that its author later referred to Mary as “a second sacrifice,” which affirmed the reading that “she sacrificed herself as the priest.”23 Van Esbroeck also extensively compared Tbilisi A-40 to Jerusalem 108, a later manuscript of the *Life of the Virgin*, as well as to John Geometrician’s tenth-century revision of the *Life of the Virgin*.24 Both of those Last Supper passages omitted Mary’s Last Supper

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21 Stephen J. Shoemaker, “The (Pseudo-)Maximus *Life of the Virgin* and the Byzantine Marian Tradition,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 67, no. 1 (April 2016): 114–42, and for other scholars, see 116n1. See also Booth, “On the *Life of the Virgin*,” 164–97, esp. 167n69, where his proposal for later dating is undermined by his failure to investigate the fifth-century Six Books palimpsest translated by Agnes Smith Lewis. The *Life of the Virgin* shares with this fifth-century palimpsest several literary elements omitted by the later Dormition homilists; shared elements include Mary preaching, teaching women, instructing women to cense with incense, and sending evangelists out from Jerusalem. The *Life of the Virgin* thus relies upon the early Six Books text, not merely the later homilies as Booth proposes.

22 Van Esbroeck, *Vie* [Fr.], XXII, XXXVI–VIII.

23 *Life of the Virgin* 128 (Van Esbroeck, *Vie* [Fr.], 115, discussion on XXXVII–VIII). Shoemaker discusses the passage about Mary being a second sacrifice, but without mentioning Van Esbroeck’s translation that Mary sacrificed herself at the Last Supper (Shoemaker, *Life*, 30–35).

24 For Jerusalem 108, see Van Esbroeck, *Vie* [Fr.], XXXVI–VIII, 64n74; and *Vie* [Geor.], XIV–XVII; for John Geometrician, see *Vie* [Fr.], XIX–XXIX, XXXVII, 64n74a; and *Vie* [Geor.], XIII, XV–XVI.
role, but with different variants, and Van Esbroeck therefore concluded both were censored versions of the older text preserved in Tbilisi A-40.\footnote{For John Geometrician’s variant, see Van Esbroeck, Vie [Fr.], XXII; for Jerusalem 108’s variant, see 64n74; regarding “J” is Jerusalem 108, see XXXVI, and see XXXVII for Jerusalem 108’s variant being the result of scribal censorship, which it shares with John Geometrician’s.}

In 2012, in his first published Georgian translation, Stephen Shoemaker presented what he purported was a new translation of the Life of the Virgin intended to correct what he called Van Esbroeck’s “mistakes,” “unintelligibility,” and “hyper-literalism.”\footnote{Shoemaker, Life, 4–5.} Shoemaker, however, did not retranslate Tbilisi A-40. He instead relied upon three different manuscripts, the first being Jerusalem 108\footnote{Ibid., 4. His second was Jerusalem 148, dated eleventh/twelfth century—but lacking chapters 2–102 (Last Supper is 74). His third was Mount Sinai 68, dated twelfth century; for manuscript descriptions, see Van Esbroeck, Vie [Geor.], V–XI.}—the same manuscript Van Esbroeck had called censored, something Shoemaker neglected to mention along with the detail that Jerusalem 108 is dated thirteenth to sixteenth century, much later than Tbilisi A-40.\footnote{Shoemaker deferred to Van Esbroeck for manuscript descriptions; Shoemaker, Life, 3n3. For dating, see Van Esbroeck, Vie [Geor.], V–XII, esp. VI–VII for Tbilisi A-40 (T), and IX–X for Jerusalem 108 (J).}

Most directly relevant to this essay, where Van Esbroeck’s translation read that Mary sacrificed herself, Shoemaker’s reads “he sacrificed himself”\footnote{Shoemaker, Life, 102.}—the very same variant in Jerusalem 108 that Van Esbroeck called censored. Shoemaker briefly justified his gender change in a footnote, primarily by citing one of his own articles.\footnote{Van Esbroeck, Vie [Fr.], 64n74; XXXVI–II.} In that article, he admitted Van Esbroeck’s translation was plausible: “On a rhetorical level, then, it seems rather plausible that Mary should, in fact, be understood as this sentence’s subject who somehow at the Last Supper offered herself as a reconciling sacrifice”—but, he added, a text that actually elevated Mary that far was “rather difficult to imagine.”\footnote{Shoemaker, “Virgin Mary in the Ministry,” 448, emphasis added.} Shoemaker ended his discussion of the Last Supper passage with the argument that Van Esbroeck’s translation was undermined by John Geometrician’s variant\footnote{That John Geometrician and Jerusalem 108 were censored versions of the text in Tbilisi A-40, see Van Esbroeck, Vie [Fr.], XXII and XXXVII.}—yet neglected to mention that Van Esbroeck’s opinion differed\footnote{Shoemaker, “Virgin Mary in the Ministry,” 449n26; that “J” is Jerusalem 108, not John Geometrician, see Van Esbroeck, Vie [Geor.], IX, and Vie [Fr.], XXXVI. For John Geometrician’s variant, see Van Esbroeck, Vie [Fr.], XXII, and for Jerusalem 108’s see 64n74.}—and then curiously cited Jerusalem 108’s simple masculinized variant instead of John Geometrician’s more complex one.\footnote{Ibid., 449.}
Shoemaker’s translation contains other changes to Van Esbroeck’s descriptions of female religious authority. Sometimes Shoemaker footnotes these changes. For example, where Van Esbroeck called the women who evangelized with John “apostles,” Shoemaker calls them “co-apostles”—but footnotes a minor spelling correction, concluding, “Of course, the meaning is the same in either case.” In other instances, however, Shoemaker does not footnote his changes. For example, where Van Esbroeck said Mary prayed “between the doors of the altar”—which suggests her priesthood—Shoemaker instead says she prayed “in front of the doors of the sanctuary.” In another example, Van Esbroeck’s translation depicted, as Luigi Gambero said, “Mary’s presence at the baptism of her Son”—which would be expected given her priesthood—yet without any explanation, Shoemaker modifies sentence structure and omits the word “also,” with the result that his translation obscures her presence there. Finally, in the Last Supper scene, still without a footnote, Shoemaker replaces Van Esbroeck’s “twelve apostles” with “twelve disciples”—thereby essentially harmonizing the Life of the Virgin’s Last Supper scene with the gospels of Mark and Matthew, which present the Twelve as the only disciples there, so that subsequent mentions of “disciples” appear to refer back to them. By contrast, Van Esbroeck’s “twelve apostles” presented the Twelve as a subset of the larger group of disciples at the meal, male and female. Van Esbroeck’s reading is affirmed by the immediately preceding juxtaposition of Mary and the women. It is further affirmed by John Geometrician’s Life of the Virgin, which retained explicitly that both men disciples and women disciples were at the meal, and that it was a shared meal.

Early Christian Writings Consistent with the Life of the Virgin’s Last Supper

The scribe who penned the Life of the Virgin not only knew older traditions about Mary’s birth and death from the Protevangelium and Dormition narratives, but also apparently knew older traditions about Mary as a eucharistic priest. In any case, the traditions behind two early Christian texts are consistent
with the Life of the Virgin’s Last Supper scene. First, the tradition of Jesus authorizing Mary and the other women at the Last Supper as eucharistic ministers is seen in an adverse reading most completely retained in the Sahidic translation of the third-century Didascalia apostolorum, whose scribe apparently accepted without debate that the women disciples had attended the Last Supper. What he contradicted was not that women were there, but that Jesus had given them eucharistic authority like he gave the men. Most curious, yet consistent with his knowing the Life of the Virgin’s Last Supper tradition, this scribe tried to discredit the women’s authority by discrediting Mary’s. Jesus did not give a eucharistic role to women, this scribe claimed, because Mary laughed during the ritual.  

The second text is the third-century Gospel of Bartholomew, one of the writings that described Mary as the liturgical leader of the apostles. This gospel depicted Mary as a co-priest at the altar of the Jerusalem Temple, with a Great Angel identified as the Father. They stood together at the Temple altar, sharing a loaf of bread and cup of wine.

A tradition of male and female co-priests at the Last Supper quite possibly was known to the second-century Christian community that Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 155–205) complained had men and women who performed the eucharistic ritual together:

Handing mixed cups to the women, he bids them consecrate these in his presence. When this has been done, he himself produces another cup of much larger size than that which the deluded woman has consecrated, and pouring from the smaller one consecrated by the woman into that which has been brought forward by himself, he at the same time pronounces these words.

Irenaeus was merely the first to record female eucharistic officiants in this region. Later, bishops south of Lyon at the Council of Nîmes (ca. 394) complained about women ordained into Levitical ministry. Pope Gelasius


43 Gospel of Bartholomew 2.15–20.


45 Council of Nîmes, Canon 2 (in Madigan and Osiek, Ordained Women, 184–85).
(492–496) likewise complained that in southern Italy, “women are encouraged to serve at the sacred altars and to perform all the other tasks that are assigned only to the service of men.”46 And in 511, bishops north of Lyon chastised priests in Brittany for officiating masses with women, “who are employed in the divine sacrifice; so that, while you are distributing the Eucharist, they hold the chalices and presume to administer the blood of Christ to the people.”47 As late as 829, bishops in this region were still complaining about women giving people the Body and Blood. “We have attempted in every way possible,” they wrote Louis the Pious, “to prevent women from approaching the altar.”48 These continuing reports indicate the Council of Laodicea’s late fourth-century admonition against women approaching the altar had little impact, at least in some communities.

The male and female Christian priesthood, however, was by no means only a Western phenomenon. Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310–403) wrote that the “Montanists,” a popular Christian sect in ancient Greece that called itself New Prophecy, had both male and female priests: “They have woman bishops, presbyters, and the rest; they say that none of this makes any difference because ‘In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.’”49 In the same period, two other Greek-speaking authors held up the gender-parallel church titles of priest and priestess, along with deacon and deaconess, as exemplary, and did so without any explanation, suggesting their audiences needed none. Both authors paired presbuteros and presbutis, which their modern editors translated as priest and priestess, justified because when an ancient author paired masculine and feminine titles in a list of ecclesial titles, then they must be translated with parallel meaning.50 The first passage was in the Acts of Philip, which depicted a woman named Mariamne preparing the communion bread and baptizing women.51 Its author sharply criticized people who “blasphemed against male and female priests, eunuchs, deacons, deaconesses, and virgins with lies about debauchery and adultery.”52 The second passage was in the Martyrdom of Matthew. It said

46 Gelasius I, Letter 14 (in Madigan and Osiek, Ordained Women, 186–88, quotation on 186).
47 Letter from Licinius, Melanius, Eustochius (in Madigan and Osiek, Ordained Women, 188–90).
48 Eisen, Women Officeholders, 134.
51 Acts of Philip 8.2, 14.9 (in François Bovon and Christopher R. Matthews, trans., The Acts of Philip [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012], 74, 91). Note that “Mariamne” was also used in the oldest text of the Protevangelium for Mary the mother of Jesus; for detail see Kateusz, “Collyridian Déjà Vu,” 91, 91n99.
the apostle Matthew ordained King Bulphamnus a priest, Queen Ziphagia a priestess, their son a deacon, and his wife, a deaconess.53

Early Christian artists likewise depicted a gender-parallel priesthood in both Eastern and Western works. In fact, the sculptors of the two oldest surviving pieces of art depicting people inside a real church depicted men and women in parallel flanking the altar. They illustrated liturgical scenes inside the consecrated sanctuaries of two of the most important orthodox churches in the Roman Empire—the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Pulcheria inside the Holy of Holies of the Second Hagia Sophia

Figure 1 depicts the massive stone front of a sarcophagus discovered in 1988 in a hypogeum adjacent the Theodosian walls in Istanbul. The stone panel's large size, approximately 3'6" x 6'6", as well as the dress of the people portrayed, signified that the sculptor's patron or patroness was high rank. Here, a man and a woman flank the altar under the arched canopy of the ciborium, with its curtains, lattice barrier, and cross. Other than a boy beside the woman, in almost every respect, the woman and man have mirror symmetrical poses—their raised arms, their solemn gazes, the curve of their torsos, and even the pointing of their feet.54

Art historian Johannes Deckers and archeologist Ümit Serdaroğlu published this find in 1993, pointing out that the column capitals carved on this sarcophagus panel were the same as those of the nearby second Hagia Sophia, completed in 415. The second Hagia Sophia burned during the Nika riots under Justinian, who built the third Hagia Sophia, which still stands. Based on the hypogeum's site, the early Christian cross, and the style of the man's clothing and bulb clasp, they dated it tightly to the end of the first third of the fifth century.55


Deckers and Serdaroğlu’s dating makes this carving contemporary with a reported conflict in 428 at the door to the holy of holies in the second Hagia Sophia—a conflict between the virgin Augusta Pulcheria (399–453), and Nestorius, the new patriarch of Constantinople. At fifteen, Pulcheria became regent for her younger brother, Theodosius II, and, according to the church historian Sozomen, she consecrated her virginity with a new altar table in the second Hagia Sophia in a spectacular ceremony before all the priests and people. The Augusta Pulcheria’s portrait was above the altar, just as a century later, the Augusta Theodora’s portrait was above the altar in San Vitale in Ravenna. Most importantly, according to the Letter to Cosmas, Pulcheria was accustomed to taking communion inside the holy of holies with her younger brother. Later sources described Byzantine emperors taking communion at the altar with their own hands “as the priest”—but the letter did not specify what the rest of the eucharistic ritual looked like, only that while the previous patriarch Sisinnius

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was alive, Pulcheria took communion in the holy of holies with her brother. This sculptor thus carved a liturgical scene in the second Hagia Sophia that comports with what the Letter of Cosmas said was Pulcheria’s custom.

According to the Letter to Cosmas, just before the Easter service in 428, the new patriarch Nestorius heard about Pulcheria’s custom. He ran to the door of the holy of holies to stop her and her women from entering.

Pulcheria ordered, “Let me enter as is my custom.”

He answered, “Only priests can tread in this place.”

She replied, “Why have I not given birth to God?”

What is certain is that Nestorius soon lost his job. Scholars, however, debate why Pulcheria, who by various accounts modeled herself after Mary, would have invoked Mary as the Godbearer to justify entering the holy of holies like a priest. Perhaps explaining why, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) taught that virgin women also give birth to Christ. Thus, Pulcheria similarly may have believed that as a virgin she was imbued with the Virgin’s liturgical authority—authority seen in the Protevangelium, which depicted her inside the holy of holies, and the Gospel of Bartholomew, which depicted her at the altar and as the liturgical leader of the male apostles through whom Nestorius claimed his own authority.

Female and Male Co-Priests at Old St. Peter’s Altar

Figure 2 is the second artifact that illustrates a scene of men and women inside a real church. This carved ivory panel on a reliquary box is usually dated to the second quarter of the fifth century—essentially contemporary with Pulcheria, who lived until 453. Discovered in 1906 beneath the altar area of a church near Pola, Croatia, the box almost certainly was carved elsewhere. Due to its quality and a papal motif, some art historians have hypothesized that it was a papal commission, perhaps for an imperial patron.

Anton Gnirs, the first scholar to publish an article about the exquisite box, as well as several subsequent art historians, described this ivory scene as a liturgical scene inside a church presbytery. Two men and two women stood, arms
raised, flanking its ciborium (the beautiful columned structure around the altar). Inside the ciborium, a man and a woman faced each other across the altar.66

Figure 3 shows how the arms-raised men and women were portrayed with open mouths, as if singing. The closest documented parallel to these two gender-divided choirs may be the first-century Therapeutae’s divided choirs of men and women. Philo said that during their sacred all-night festival these choirs sang like the Israelites, with “Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess leading the women.” They sang all night, and “when they saw the sun rising, they raised their hands to heaven.”67

Suggesting that the ivory sculptor had illustrated a scene in Old Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, the six twisted columns shown on the ivory panel resembled its six twisted columns. After the old basilica was razed in the sixteenth century,


67 Philo of Alexandria, On the Contemplative Life 83–89 (in Yonge, Philo, 706), emphasis added.
those columns were reused in the modern basilica’s galleries. Furthering the conclusion that the sculptor had indeed represented a scene inside Old Saint Peter’s, a carving on the box’s lid resembled its apse mosaic.68

After war broke out in 1939, the Croatian authorities sent the ivory box to Italy for safekeeping. Curiously, the very next year, breaking its own rule that such holy places were inviolable, the Vatican began excavations beneath Saint Peter’s high altar. Due to pilgrim traffic in the Confessio (the large marble pit in front of the altar), excavators were not permitted to dig there, so they excavated behind the altar, through the underground Clementine chapel.69 Beneath the modern altar, they discovered a stack of medieval altars, and at the very bottom, the approximately 8’ x 8’ wall of a second-century Roman shrine embedded with the remains of a horizontal stone slab70—a mensa tabletop where Christians may have made offerings since the second century.71

Below the second-century mensa the excavators found the remains of an underground grave structure, which they speculated had contained Peter’s bones.72 Two well-known ancient witnesses had reported that the old basilica's

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68 Longhi, *Capsella*, plates IVa and b versus VIb.


70 Kirschbaum, *Tombs*, 55, fig. 7 (stack of altars); 67, fig. 12 (slab); 56, and plate 26 (shrine).


altar was over Peter’s tomb. Jerome (347–420), who had lived in Rome, said that the bishop of Rome offered sacrifices over Peter’s bones and that Peter’s tomb was worthy of being that altar.73 Gregory of Tours (538–594), whose deacon Agiulf lived ten years in Rome, wrote that “the tomb is located beneath the altar”—sub altare.74 When excavators found an empty grave structure under a stone table in Old Saint Peter’s, they seemed to have confirmed a long Catholic tradition.75

Repeated construction inside Saint Peter’s presbytery had resulted in “obliterating all trace” of everything except for the second-century shrine itself.76 The mid-fifth-century ivory sculptor, however, had so accurately reproduced that shrine, from its 8’ x 8’ wall to its small arched niche where the cross stood, that Vatican excavator Engelbert Kirschbaum conceded that the ivory was “so striking even in its details as to confirm conclusively its interpretation as the Constantinian apse in Saint Peter’s. This ancient representation is therefore our authority for the interpretation and reconstruction of the missing portions.”77

An important missing portion was the ciborium over the altar—but it is on the ivory. Today, virtually every ciborium is square, but during the fourth century, some were not. For example, the monument over Christ’s tomb in Jerusalem was probably a hexagon.78 Twisted columns also encircled Christ’s

73 Jerome, Contra Vigilantium 1.8 (in William Henry Freemantle, trans., The Principal Works of St. Jerome, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2, vol. 6 [New York: Christian Literature, 1893], 417–23, esp. 420). “Does the bishop of Rome do wrong when he offers sacrifices to the Lord over the venerable bones of the dead men Peter and Paul, as we should say, but according to you, over a worthless bit of dust, and judges their tombs worthy to be Christ’s altars?”


77 Kirschbaum, Tombs, 60.

tomb, so perhaps the six twisted columns in Saint Peter's originally were intended to make another hexagon around Peter's tomb. Perhaps the 8' x 8' wall of Peter's shrine was too tall to accommodate that design aesthetically, because as seen on the ivory, Peter's ciborium was constructed instead as a half hexagon. The shrine itself centered on the half hexagon's longer back face, the corners of which were demarked by two of the twisted columns. Two more columns were set in line against the corners of the apse. The final two columns demarked the half hexagon's shorter front face, framing the shrine behind. This architecture may have been intended to symbolically link Peter with Christ, for worshippers in the nave saw a hexagon profile with spiral columns over Peter's tomb beneath the half dome of the apse, a vision that evoked the famous monument with spiral columns over Christ's tomb beneath the dome of the Anastasis church in Jerusalem.

The Vatican excavators took nearly a decade to write their final report, yet neglected to mention that the fifth-century sculptor had depicted a woman at the mensa. The report, however, contained two new drawings that showed the ciborium as a square—a shape then used to suggest that the mensa had not been the altar.\(^{79}\) Like the ivory sculptor, the Vatican illustrators drew the second-century shrine with its mensa on the back face of the ciborium—but instead of drawing the ciborium as a half hexagon, they drew it as a 20' x 20' square. Kirschbaum later spelled out the significance of their change. The overhead ribs of a square ciborium, he said, intersect in the middle, and the big lamp would hang from that midpoint—above vacant floor 10' in front of the mensa. Kirschbaum pointed out that the altar would be under the lamplight—so: "We have to suppose a portable altar table."\(^{80}\)

See figure 4 and 4a for a side-by-side comparison of the two ciboria. Figure 4 is taken from the ivory and 4a from one of the Vatican drawings.\(^{81}\) As seen on the ivory, the half-hexagon ciborium was beautifully proportionate to the apse. The Vatican's hypothetical square ciborium, by comparison, juts awkwardly into the transept. The half-hexagon ciborium's rear face was wider than its front face—and the sculptor thus carved its beams angling in. By contrast, artistic perspective meant the Vatican illustrator drew the square ciborium's rear face smaller than its front—and thus incorrectly drew the side beams angling out. Finally, the ivory sculptor showed the overhead ribs intersecting over the wide back face, with the lamp hanging there—over the shrine with its mensa—exactly

\(^{79}\) Bruno M. Apolloni Ghetti, Antonio Ferrua, Enrico Josi, and Engelbert Kirschbaum, Esplorazioni sotto la confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano, eseguite negli anni 1940–1949, 2 vols. (Vatican City: Città del Vaticano, 1951), vol. 1, fig. 121, plate H; and Kirschbaum, Tombs, fig. 10, plate 29. Everything in front of the shrine in fig. 10’s “reconstruction” is a dotted line, in other words, not actually excavated, hypothetical.

\(^{80}\) Kirschbaum, Tombs, 61, emphasis added.

\(^{81}\) Ghetti, Esplorazioni, vol. 1, plate H; and Kirschbaum, Tombs, plate 29.
where one would expect the light to shine when the shrine had been “the architectural focus of the whole building.”

Some prominent scholars contradicted the Vatican report, arguing that the stone mensa above Peter’s tomb had been the basilica’s altar, just as the two ancient witnesses had reported. André Grabar made that case. So did José Ruysschaert, who rebutted each tortured reason the excavation team gave for why the mensa could not be the altar, such as that it was too tall or too small. The portable altar theory, however, became reified six years later when Kirschbaum apparently collaborated with Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins on two books published in 1957 that both defended the Vatican position. In circular fashion, they cited each other for the portable altar theory; Toynbee and Perkins

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52 Toynbee, Shrine, 201.

53 André Grabar, Martyrium, recherches sur le culte des reliques et l’art chrétien antique, 2 vols. (Paris: Collège de France, 1946). Grabar was familiar with the excavations and published before the excavators’ final report.

cited Kirschbaum, and Kirschbaum cited Toynbee and Perkins. They even divided and conquered the two ancient witnesses. Kirschbaum paraphrased Jerome but omitted Gregory of Tours’s statement that the tomb was beneath the altar. Toynbee and Perkins quoted Gregory but omitted Jerome. Toynbee subsequently departed the debate, but during the Anglican infighting over female ordination before the 1968 Lambeth Conference, Perkins, an Anglican, continued to vigorously argue that Old Saint Peter’s altar could have been anywhere except where Jerome and Gregory of Tours said it was: “Wherever the altar may have been (presumably in the nave and very possibly of a portable nature) it was certainly not over the grave of the Apostle.”

This defensive scholarship arguably would never have been conceived had the sculptor carved the liturgical scene in Old Saint Peter’s with two men at the altar instead of a man and a woman (fig. 5). Art historians, however, see a woman. Furthermore, they see her raising some kind of container with both hands. If the sculptor had carved her as a man instead of as a woman, then presumably, from the beginning, this container would have been identified as the bowl for the eucharistic wine.

Who was this woman? Davide Longhi, in his 2006 book on the ivory box, proposed she was the western Augusta Galla Placidia (392–450) and that the man on the opposite side of the altar was her son, Valentinian III, the Augustus. Perhaps, like her niece Pulcheria, Galla Placidia modeled herself after Mary. In any case, Bishop Ambrose himself had instructed her that a good empress mother followed Mary’s example. If Longhi’s identification is correct, then the sculptor potentially carved an imperial mother and son reprising the scene of Mary and her son at the Last Supper.

85 Toynbee, Shrine, 208n28; Engelbert Kirschbaum, Die Gräber der Apostelfürsten (Frankfurt: Heinrich Scheffler, 1957), 57n13; and see also Kirschbaum’s 1959 English translation, Kirschbaum, Tombs, 61n13.
86 Kirschbaum, Tombs, 157 (Jerome paraphrase), 158 (Gregory of Tours truncation); Kirschbaum paraphrased Jerome saying the sacrifice was “at”—instead of “over”—Peter’s tomb, then argued “at” the tomb was “reasonably” consistent with the Liber Pontificalis (61n13). Recent research shows the Liber Pontificalis is remarkably unreliable with respect to Old St. Peter’s; see Richard Westall, “Constantius II and the Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican,” Historia 64, no. 2 (2015): 205–42.
90 Longhi, Capsella, 29; and Tilmann Buddensieg, “Le coffret en ivoire de Pola: Saint-Pierre et le Latran,” Cahiers archéologiques 10 (1959): 157–95, esp. 163. This container is sometimes hypothesized a pyxide with brandea that Gregory the Great described 150 years later.
Supporting Longhi’s identification of this woman as Galla Placidia, both Longhi and Margherita Guarducci, in her book on the box, identified Galla Placidia and Valentinian depicted together elsewhere on the box.\(^92\) In addition, Galla Placidia built several churches in Ravenna, most likely the box’s original destination; Bishop Maximianus of Ravenna, who had been a deacon in Pola, probably re-donated it to the church near Pola a century later.\(^93\) Most importantly, both Augusti are known to have attended the annual all-night masses commemorating Peter in Old Saint Peter’s.\(^94\) And after one of these rituals, Galla Placidia herself wrote that she and Valentinian had been “at the martyr’s very altar.”\(^95\)


\(^93\) Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62–84.


Theodora and Justinian Model Mary and Jesus at the Last Supper

A century later, another artist depicted another empress raising the bowl for the eucharistic wine. Around the year 547, huge mosaic portraits of Justinian and Theodora were installed flanking the altar inside the holy of holies of the orthodox Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, the western Empire’s capital. Here, the two Augusti are clearly holding the chalice for the wine and the paten for the bread. Almost all religious figural decoration from this period in the East was destroyed during later iconoclasms, but given the liturgical depiction of women in the previous two carvings, this iconography was not particularly novel.

Figure 6 shows Empress Theodora (500–548) using both hands to lift the large bowl of a eucharistic chalice. She was flanked by seven women and two eunuchs and depicted next to a curtained doorway, which may have meant she waited in the church vestibule to enter the altar area after Justinian, since she is also depicted inside the holy of holies with him.96 Shown in figure 7, on the opposite side of the altar, Emperor Justinian (483–564) held the gold paten for the bread. He was flanked (if tops of heads are counted) by twelve men, including Bishop Maximianus. As seen in figure 8, the women again were placed on the right side of the altar and the men on the left, with the mosaics’ gold tesserae glowing in the eastern light from the three windows in between.

Byzantine historian Mischa Meier has detailed Justinian’s extraordinary devotion to Mary, and also how Justinian interchanged imperial images with the divine image to create inescapable two-way visual analogies.97 Justinian was not always portrayed with a halo, but here, both he and Theodora were given large gold halos, the aura of divinity.98 Justinian flanked by twelve men could have been seen as an analogy to Jesus with the Twelve. Likewise, the seven women accompanying Theodora might have reminded viewers of the seven Hebrew virgins whom the popular Protevangelium said accompanied Mary in the temple.99 Further indicating that Theodora was to be viewed as

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Fig. 6: Theodora holds wine chalice. (In Joseph Wilpert, Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert [Freiburg im Breisgau, 1916], plate 110).

Fig. 7: Justinian holds paten for the bread. (Wilpert, Römischen Mosaiken, plate 109.)
interchangeable with Mary, an unusual scene of Epiphany was on the hem of Theodora’s *chlamys*—Mary was unseen, and the three magi held up their gold patens toward Theodora. The priests and laity who approached the altar thus saw Theodora and Justinian standing on either side of the altar offering their chalice and paten in a liturgical ritual that paralleled that of the Eucharist taking place below. Together, the empress and emperor modeled a scene analogous to Mary and Jesus at the Last Supper sacrifice in the *Life of the Virgin*.

**Conclusion**

In text and art during the first Christian centuries, from the backwaters of the empire to its imperial capitals, both advocates and opponents described a gender-parallel Christian priesthood. As demonstrated by the two very oldest scenes showing people inside a real church, this gender parallelism was modeled at the altar inside orthodox basilicas in both the East and the West, including the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Old Saint Peter’s in Rome. When assembled, this evidence challenges our modern imagination of ancient Christianity, with respect not only to what it meant to be orthodox

![Fig. 8: Altar and apse mosaics, San Vitale in Ravenna, ca. 547. Theodora and her entourage on the right. Justinian and his on the left. Courtesy of David Edward Kateusz.](image-url)
but also to the conceit that from the beginning the Christian priesthood was all male.

In short, it is no longer difficult to imagine the *Life of the Virgin*’s author penning, or copying, a Last Supper scene where both Mary and Jesus sacrificed. Similar scenes survived from early Christian literature and iconography. The mere fact, however, that the two very oldest carvings of people inside a real church depicted men and women at the altar—and both were buried—and all others lost—reveals just how profound the destruction has been.

Future research may further illuminate the theology behind Mary and Jesus co-priesting at the Last Supper, including its interrelationship with ancient concepts such as *koinonos* (Jewish and Christian), *conhospitae*, spiritual brothers and sisters, double monasteries, the Talmudic rabbis’ androgyne *adam*, and the androgyne Christ. Take, for example, Wayne A. Meeks’s influential article on “The Androgyne,” wherein he detailed many of the Jewish and Christian references to this male-female symbol, and concluded—overlooking New Prophecy using the male and female Christ in Gal 3:28 to justify male and female clergy—that by the second Pauline generation, the androgyne image had lost its power to continue “the equivalence of role accorded to women in the earlier mission.” The male and female body of the Jewish Christ, however, deserves deeper study, because the first-century “equivalence of role accorded to women” continued in some communities for centuries—at least in the liturgy, the most symbolic place where the divine gender order is modeled.

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