

Tale as Old as Time:
Three Brazen Empresses, One Fateful Apple,
and The Resulting Woes of Men

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Constantinople

The Imperial City of the Eastern Roman Empire, 4th-5th centuries¹



¹ My own edit that captures the key landmarks featured in this paper. I am working off of Seda Gümüşlü & Ufuk Serin's "Study on the Re-Assessment, Representation, and Valorization of Byzantine Cultural Heritage in Constantinople/Istanbul," from the Istanbul Studies'17 Byzantion Conference, 2017.

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The Apple

The Women, The Men, and Satan

The book of Genesis tells how humankind fell from Paradise because of an apple, the sin of Eve, and the wiles of the Devil. The late fifth century text, *Life of Dioscorus*, narrates how the fall of another woman, from a pious virgin of Christ into lustful temptation, endangered the Roman Empire. This story, too, begins with an apple. One day, in the royal palace of Constantinople, the emperor Theodosius II was given the largest, juiciest, most admirable apple. Theodosius thought such an exquisite apple should belong to an equally praiseworthy person, and “since there was no one whom he honored and esteemed more than his sister,” the emperor gave it to Pulcheria. Unbeknownst to him, Pulcheria, consumed with perfidy like Eve, immediately regifted the apple to her handsome secret lover, Marcian.² Seeking to impress the emperor with this particularly delectable produce, Marcian regifted the apple back into the hands of Theodosius. At once, Theodosius recognized the fruit, sniffed out the torrid love affair, and exiled Marcian to protect Pulcheria’s chastity. Soon thereafter, Theodosius died under suspicious circumstances and Pulcheria, that Daughter of Eve, recalled her lover back. Together they ruled the empire and forced upon it the most untrue, most wicked Chalcedonian doctrine. Such was God’s divine disapproval of the couple and their heresy that, in the moment Marcian was crowned, the sky of Constantinople darkened so ominously that the people wailed and “were in mourning, as if the end of the world had suddenly come.”³

² Marcian was not known for his good looks. At the time this story is alleged to take place (450 CE), he would have been 60 years old. In his lifetime he was apprehended as a murder suspect and tortured before the real criminal was caught. Then he enlisted as a foot soldier where shortly thereafter he was taken as a prisoner of war by the Vandals and tortured again. (Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1. trans. Michael Whitby, 2000) Unlucky and unlikely to visually entice the ladies—especially the lifelong ascetic virgin kind.

³ Reconstructed from Psuedo-Theopistus *History of Dioscorus* 241-310 (=Hist.) from the late fifth century and quote from John Rufus’ *Plerophories* 10.1-5 in the early sixth. Both translated by F. Nau, “Histoire de Dioscore, patriarche d’Alexandrie” (1903); and *Jean Rufus. Évêque de Maïouma: Plerophories* (1912).

The *Life of Dioscorus* narrates this story long after Pulcheria's death, but it does so as an embittered response to the religious influence and political power she seemed to have exercised in her later life. In her lifetime, the map of the Roman Empire that Pulcheria's family ruled looked like a pair of flexing arms wrapped tight around the entire Mediterranean Sea. In 395 CE, Pulcheria's grandfather, Theodosius I, had split the empire between his two sons.⁴ Honorius, Pulcheria's uncle, received the left arm and relocated west to Rome. Arcadius, Pulcheria's father, received the right arm and remained in Constantinople to control the eastern empire. The two arms, though originally of the same body, never quite found harmony again, and the members of the eastern Theodosian dynasty ventured into the fifth century intent on finding their place in a transforming era.

Against the backdrop of a burgeoning Constantinople, still gradually maturing into the robust imperial capital it later became, the Theodosian dynasty inherited a society suspended between its Classical past and an unsettled Christian present. In 392, Theodosius I had outlawed traditional Roman religion and reconfirmed efforts towards standardizing Christianity as the official, state-sanctioned religion.⁵ By this point in the late fourth century, the Bible had only just recently been stitched together and the church existed in a young and fragile state. By the time Pulcheria was born in 399, the early church leaders had worked tirelessly to pluck intangible and complex ideas from Scripture and stitch them into a new moral language through which the

⁴ Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.6 (trans. Walford, 1855); Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.1 (ed. Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, II.2.*, 1885. = NPNF)

⁵ This didn't immediately erase paganism or launch a systematic purge, in fact, several prominent figures in Arcadius and Theodosius' courts were pagans. There were several loopholes for people to continue pagan worship, for example, temples were ordered to close, but it wasn't an instantaneous or empire-wide administered project (*CTh* 16.10.4). More space in the Theodosian Code was dedicated to sanctioning Christianity and aligning the imperial regime with the new Christian religion (*CTh* 15.5.1; 16.5.2, 8.1). M.R. Salzman performs an in-depth study in "The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the "Theodosian Code"" (1993).

religious culture of the Eastern Roman Empire could be upheld.⁶ A pressing concern amidst the monumental societal shift was women's place in the new age. It is here that the meaning of female sexuality stepped into a central and clearly defined space in Christian thought. This was not the end of the Roman Empire but the beginning of a new, brighter age where women could, for the first time, directly participate in the creation of culture and determine their place and role in society. The Theodosian women grasped the opportunity to shape this new world by building deliberate public personas and self-presentations that embodied Christian feminine virtue.

The empresses competed against traditional Roman misogyny and the unforgiving nature of the "woman" that contemporary church leaders constructed anew from their interpretations of the Bible. As Elizabeth Clark posits, the church leaders, all men, created the new nature of "woman" that infused their familiar Roman domestic ideals with a Christian moral code.⁷ Christian theologians traced the nature of women, their most fundamental character, and the stuff of their souls, all the way back to the sin of Eve, the first woman. "Do you not know that you are also Eve?" Asked the church leader Tertullian,⁸ in a fiery lecture to a group of women, "God's judgment lives on in our age, the guilt necessarily lives on as well...Because of your punishment, that is,

⁶ The empire-wide spread of a single Christian identity was engineered through the tandem efforts of religious leaders and imperial authority. The 325 Council of Nicaea, convened by emperor Constantine, was the pioneering attempt to reach a consensus on the idea of God. Another council was held in Constantinople in 381 to reconfirm and expand on this Nicene Creed, and two more were called during the lifetimes of the empresses—Council of Ephesus in 431 and Council of Chalcedon in 451. Runesson studies early Christian identity-making in "Inventing Christian Identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I" (2008), and E. Watts argues for Christianization as a process of Roman imagination in the essay "Christianization" in *Late Ancient Knowing* (2015): 197-217. Scholars within the last three decades began to focus and emphasize Constantine's involvement in the first church council, see H. A. Drake's "Constantine and Consensus" (1995), and C. Odahl's *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (2010). In *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (2021), Carlos R. Galvão-Sobrinho argues that the impact of the power struggle at Council of Nicaea on the formation of the Council of Constantinople (381) resulted in "a struggle for power inside and outside the church." (pp. 126).

⁷ Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of "Woman" in Late Ancient Christianity," (1994): pp. 169.

⁸ Tertullian (160-220 CE) is the earliest Christian scholar I reference. Even for the people of his own time, his views were rather extreme and distasteful and certainly not the standard of Christian thought, however the essence of his belief sneaks into Christian ethos in the fourth and fifth centuries.

death, even the Son of God had to die.”⁹ If men were the sons of Adam and women the daughters of Eve, then women have inherited Eve’s sin, manifest in their naturally wicked souls—the always present “devil’s gateway.” A woman’s entire being, her image, her terrible screaming and agony each time she gave birth, all offered evidence to God’s punishment and a human suffering that directly led back to Eve’s folly.¹⁰ This was the fiery belief behind the *Life of Dioscorus*’ vivid and hostile depiction of Pulcheria. Unfortunately for Pulcheria, Christianity, unlike traditional Roman religion, offered a systematic and foundational explanation for the misogynistic stereotypes that had been used to debase and ostracize women throughout Classical history.¹¹ As the popularity of the Virgin Mary swelled across the empire in the late fourth century, Christian leaders also offered women redemption from their own innately sinful nature.

Christian theologians offered women a choice: succumb to their sinful feminine nature or receive redemption by imitating the ideal woman, the *Theotokos*, the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Mary redeemed Eve’s sin through her ideal feminine virtue. The church leaders of the Eastern Empire subscribed to this belief because they believed in the human ability to wrestle with sin and redeem oneself.¹² Theodotus of Ancyra, addressing Mary directly, proclaimed “through you, Eve’s odious condition is ended; through you, abjection has been destroyed...through you, Eve has been

⁹ Tertullian. *On the Dress of Women* 1.1.1-2. Translated by Elizabeth Clark in “Devil’s Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World” in *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith* (2008): pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Eve’s punishment in Genesis 3:16: “To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children.”

¹¹ For misogyny and the status of women in Ancient Greece see Katz, “Ideology and “The Status of Women” in Ancient Greece” (1992). For the Roman Empire see Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (2006). And Freisenbruch, *The First Ladies of Rome: The Women Behind the Caesars* (2001). On how these stereotypes transferred into late antiquity: Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (1996).

¹² Especially the Desert Mothers and Fathers. For more see: Sittser, “The Battle Without and Within: The Psychology of Sin and Salvation in the Desert Fathers and Mothers” (2009), and Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (1987), and Athanasius’ *Life of St. Anthony*.

redeemed.”¹³ Two centuries before, Irenaeus of Lyons laid bare the choice between feminine sin and piety:

Eve, having become disobedient, was made the cause of death both for herself and for all the human race. Thus also Mary had a husband selected for her and nonetheless was a virgin, yet by her obedience, she was made the cause of salvation both for herself and the human race...The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosened through the obedience of Mary.¹⁴

Female piety and the Christian concepts of virginity, marriage, and motherhood were a matter of human salvation.¹⁵ To imitate Mary, then, was a women’s call to perpetually grapple with her inner feminine sin. If she intended to achieve salvation, a woman was required to be a deferential virgin, an obedient wife, and a devoted mother.

The Theodosian women chose redemption, but they refused to be controlled. Theodosius II’s mother Eudoxia was a strong-willed and fierce guardian. His wife Eudocia was an astute and sophisticated imperial partner. And his sister Pulcheria, a virgin of Christ, was Theodosius’ mentor and protector. As their society knit Christianity into the fabric of public and private life, the three empresses each embodied an aspect of Mary which granted them access to power exclusive to their feminine status. By building a public image that personified the developing Christian concepts of virgin, wife, and mother, the empresses endowed their family with religious authority and took control of their own lives despite living in situations where women traditionally had none. Throughout their lifetimes, Pulcheria, Eudocia, and Eudoxia protected the Eastern Roman Empire from war and Roman Christian souls from eternal damnation. They negotiated with emperors,

¹³ Theodotus, *On the Mother of God*. An earlier Church Father, Theodotus engaged in the rhetoric of *Theotokos* over a century before the Mother of God was canonized at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

¹⁴ Pseudo-Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 3.22.4. translated and edited by Jean Higgins “Anastasis and the Superiority of the Woman,” (1978).

¹⁵ It became quite popular across the entire empire for bishops to write on the topic of virginity, which had equal parts to do with the emerging popularity of the Virgin Mary as it did with the intent to furnish the developing moral framework by standardizing and naturalizing ascetic female piety. See: Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*; Pseudo-Athanasius, *On Virginity*; Augustine, *On Virginity*; Clement of Alexandria, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity*; John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*.

courtiers, and church leaders. They even convened church councils. With artistry and wit, these empresses battled for authority in the game of statecraft and waded into religious controversies. These powerful women helped determine imperial and religious policy as ancient Roman society entered a new, Christian age. But this is not that story. This is instead the story of how powerful empresses were rendered powerless.

The voices and images of these empresses are largely lost to us, captured primarily in objects made and ancient texts written by men who held tight to traditional misogyny. In the artistic and literary worlds created by these men, daughters of Mary were always, truly, Daughters of Eve. Though Pulcheria vowed publicly to remain a devout virgin her entire life, the *Life of Dioscorus* painted her as a temptress and the new Eve.¹⁶ But, because she guided the Roman empire and convened church councils, much more was at stake than the tale of one temptress, a poor besotted man, and an apple. The empresses' piety and sin mattered, especially to the men who wrote about them. During and long after their lifetimes, the empresses' stories were rewritten, their reputations vilified, and their names consigned to legend. Despite their meticulously cultivated public images, misogynistic stereotypes were devastating weapons that ancient men not only wielded well but weaved into the new Christian essence of womanhood. There was no shield strong enough to protect the empresses from the piercing onslaught of male opinion and divine judgment. Three Theodosian empresses dared to find empowerment in their womanhood, but their lives ended in condemnation. Their story begins with a gruesome death.

¹⁶ "Like Eve, if Pulcheria had kept her eyes from temptation [Marcian] the true faith would not have been so stricken." (*Hist.* 250.) and "[Satan] spoke to Pulcheria and, like Eve, she took his counsel" (246).

The Mother

The Circle of Life

On April 10, 401, in her stately private imperial chambers, the empress Eudoxia labored through the birth of her fourth child. Already a mother to three daughters, Pulcheria, Arcadia, and Flaccilla, the six hovering midwives and female attendants would have been a familiar sight.¹⁷ The room surrounding her hosted a pot of warm water and olive oil, with swaths of wool and bandages to cradle the next imperial child, and the smoke of incense slowly clouding the room and obscuring the pungent smells of childbirth.¹⁸ Braced by helpers on either side, Eudoxia was held upright on a birthing chair as a son—all crying and wrinkly—fell into the waiting arms of her kneeling midwife.¹⁹ In the late Eastern Roman Empire, childbirth was still extremely dangerous for both mother and child, and by cultural tradition, the imperial family entered a period of waiting to see whether their son would live or die. After a week of bed rest for the empress and nine nervous days of observance, the child reached his day of naming and the imperial parents publicly welcomed their heir into society as Theodosius II.²⁰ Aelia Eudoxia, wife to one emperor, had finally become mother to the next.

Eudoxia was not always accustomed to her lifestyle as imperial wife and mother. In fact, she must have been bewildered when she learned she was being married to the emperor of the Roman Empire. As an outsider to the Roman political establishment and to the Roman people, Eudoxia was not a prestigious bride. Born to a Frankish general in the west, Eudoxia was far from

¹⁷ Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.6

¹⁸ Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.14.66, 74, translated by Nicholson J. Eastman (1991). For more on this see G. Nathan's *The Family in Late Antiquity* (2002), and Watts, *The Last Pagan Generation* (2015).

¹⁹ Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.14.66.

²⁰ Tertullian, *De idolatria* 16.1 and John Chrysostom. *Homily 12 1 Corinthians* 13. All Chrysostom homilies I use have been translated by Schaff, NPNE, I.10, 1889.

home, living in Constantinople, when Theodosius I died unexpectedly in 395 and left the Eastern Roman Empire into the reluctant and rather incompetent hands of his son Arcadius.²¹



Bust of Emperor Arcadius.²²

Shorter than average, with an unathletic build and a sloth-like disposition that manifested itself in his sluggish speech and his bleary, slow-blinking eyes, Arcadius was not the hottest bachelor in Constantinople, but he was a catch to the imperial courtiers who sought a direct and stable link to imperial power.²³ Arcadius's marriage had become a pressing matter as courtiers tried to take advantage of the political turmoil following the sudden death of Arcadius's father, Theodosius I, in 395. Eudoxia was hastily collected from her city home and married to Arcadius before Theodosius I even received a public funeral in Constantinople.²⁴ "Eudoxia was not a

²¹ Philostorgius. *Ecclesiastical History* 11.6

²² Constantinople, late 4th century. Istanbul Archeological Museum, Turkey.

²³ Philostorgius. *Ecclesiastical History* 11.3; J. B. Bury in "Lecture V" of *History of the Later Roman Empire* (1889) claimed that the only thing worth remembering about Arcadius was his beautiful wife and his pious children, that even "the Muses of History yawned" at the mention of his reign (pp. 113).

²⁴ Described how two rivaling courtiers, Rufinus and Eutropius, scrambled to exert more control over Arcadius following the death of his father by entering him in a marriage best suited for their individual ambitions (Zosimus, *Nova Historia* 5.3.2-3, trans. Ronald T. Ridley, 2017). Eutropius chose Eudoxia for her lack of political connection

dullard”²⁵ like Arcadius, but she was a descendent of barbarians and a stranger to the network of elite noble families and politicking church leaders that swirled through the eastern imperial court. Thus, to the imperial advisors, she was the perfect candidate to become Arcadius’ wife. To their dismay, Eudoxia grasped the realities of her new status well and revealed herself to be an astute player in the game of statecraft. At the end of the fourth century, obligated to demonstrate her orthodoxy and legitimacy, Eudoxia plunged into a public role as the new imperial Christian mother.

Raised in a society that placed an exceptional significance on reputation, Eudoxia was conscious of the immense public scrutiny she was subjected to and the fatal consequence of any slip up. The only image of Eudoxia that survives is her profile on a coin released just after the birth of Theodosius II in 401.



Portrait of Empress Eudoxia on coin.²⁶

and support base, and in hopes she would be more beauty and less brains. Though this story can hardly be supported by historical fact (Zosimus wrote *Historia Nova* a century after Eudoxia’s lifetime), it is true that the urgent marriage is unlikely to merely be a coincidence. We will probably never be certain what inspired Arcadius to, just three months after the death of his father, marry the ill-connected, unsuitable Eudoxia.

²⁵ Philostorgius. *Ecclesiastical History* 11.6.

²⁶ RIC 10 Arcadius.12.

Known to be a “lady of remarkable beauty,” the empress cuts an attractive and regal portrait, with a string of pearl earrings dangling down her slender neck towards her pearl necklace and opulent draped imperial robe.²⁷ Hovering above the jeweled headdress that wrapped around her tightly coiled hair was the *manus dei*, the Hand of God reaching down from the heavens to crown her in divine authority.²⁸ Complete with a gentle expression in her gaze and a small quirk of her lips, Eudoxia appears every bit the imperial Christian mother. Trained in Roman social deportment and schooled by a personal tutor who would later become an influential consecrated bishop, she was well-educated in Roman culture and Christian theology.²⁹ Thus, Eudoxia was well aware her status as imperial mother would not protect her from political machinating disguised as court gossip.

The deliberate destruction of a Roman woman’s public image had real, devastating effects in a society that placed such an emphasis on reputation. It could even prove fatal. Everyone knew that just a few decades before, Constantine had arranged for his wife, the empress Fausta, to be boiled alive on rumors of adultery.³⁰ The second century historian Tacitus wrote about how, more than five decades earlier, the empress Agrippina connived her way to power through multiple palace intrigues. The fact that she was a descendant of Augustus, the first Roman emperor, a granddaughter of Emperor Tiberius, a sister of Emperor Caligula, a niece and wife of Emperor Claudius, and the mother of Emperor Nero made no difference in her characterization as a power-

²⁷ Zosimus, *Nova Historia* 5.3.2. While we have no way to be certain of Eudoxia’s “remarkable beauty,” the ancient writers mocked her relentlessly but never once criticized her appearance.

²⁸ A classic study on the origins of *manus dei* in Roman propaganda is MacIsaac, “‘The Hand of God’: A Numismatic Study” (1975). Geoffrey Greatrex and Elton Hugh trace how the Roman traditional mythology of Victoria was blended with the *manus dei* symbol in coinage during Eudoxia’s lifetime in “Declaring Victory, Concealing Defeat? Continuity and Change in Imperial Coinage of the Roman West, c. 383–c. 408.” (2017).

²⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.6.6

³⁰ Everyone from fourth century aristocratic pagans in Rome to fifth century traveling monks in east: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 14.11.20; Zosimus, *Nova Historia* 2.29.2-4; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.4; Eutropius, *Historiae Romanae* 10.6.3; Jerome, *Chronicon*.

hungry, manipulative, murderess who raised the Empire’s most evil emperor.³¹ Her predecessor, Empress Messalina, had either been killed or took her own life after her entanglement in rumors of an adulterous affair and debauched promiscuity.³² Licentious, cruel, conniving empresses prowled ancient Roman literature and polluted the popular imagination. When ancient authors undermined the reputations of empresses, they often did so to safeguard guard strict cultural norms for women in prestigious and influential positions. This took on new meaning—and new danger—with the spread of Christianity. No longer did negative stereotypes just categorize the outward behavior of women. They now peered deep inside their souls and called them wicked and sinful. Eudoxia’s survival depended on her ability to cultivate a façade of exemplary temperance and feminine piety.



On the left is the backside of Eudoxia’s solidus from 401, on the right is the backside of Fausta’s solidus from 325-26.³³

³¹ Tacitus. *Annals* 12-13: “From this moment it was a changed state [versa ex eo civitas], and all things moved at the fiat of a woman – but not a woman who, as Messalina, treated in wantonness the Roman Empire as a toy. It was a tight-drawn, almost masculine tyranny [quasi virile servitium].” (12.7). Translated and edited by Martijn Icks in “Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund as Evil Empresses in the Historiographic Tradition,” (2019): 185-186.

³² Tacitus, *Annals* 11.37-38.

³³ Eudoxia’s Reverse: RIC 10 Arcadius.12; Fausta’s Reverse: RIC 7 Constantine.217.

On the reverse of the same coin issued the year Theodosius was born is the personification of Victory seated next to the shield of God and the legend: SALUS REI PUBLICAE, “Safety to the State.”³⁴ Eudoxia’s role as mother to the heir of the empire and was a matter of Roman security and public spectacle. From the moment of conception to the feeding and weaning stages, a barrage of advice was offered to expectant mothers. Some of it was based on the theories of respected medical practitioners, but increasingly this advice was rooted in Christian ideas of maternity. Christian theologians and traditional Roman culture found a consensus that motherhood was the most natural state of women. In antiquity, empresses were respected in Roman society as symbols of fecundity and dynastic continuity, granted they provide good imperial heirs. Motherhood was traditionally an avenue to status that offered one of the few influential positions to which all women could aspire.³⁵ Empress Fausta’s coin in the early fourth century depicted the empress holding her two children and above her figure, the legend: SPES REI PUBLICAE, “Hope of the State.” In Eudoxia’s society, however, women became increasingly judged by the Christian piety their maternal nature passed on to their children. In 401 Augustine wrote “I cannot think of any reason for women’s being made [by God]...if we dismiss the reason of procreation.”³⁶ A woman’s agony and possible death in childbirth directly connected her to Eve’s punishment.³⁷ But like Mary, women redeemed themselves of the sin of Eve only once they bore, weaned, and raised a proper Christian child into adulthood. In the transforming Christian society, the sole reason God supposedly created women was for them to bear children who they raised to become “athlete[s]

³⁴ The symbol on the shield is a Christogram made from the Greek letters Chi (χ) and Rho (ρ) to form the Greek word Χριστός, “Christ.” Eusebius details its famous first use by Constantine in *Life of Constantine* 1.26, 28-29

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa in *On Virginity* 19 writes “among a people with whom motherhood was sought after and classed as a blessing and regarded as a public duty,” in talking about past Roman culture. This passage suggests that motherhood doesn’t enjoy its same cultural status as it once did and that now another avenue woman can take is a life of chaste piety as a Virgin of Christ.

³⁶ Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 9.5.

³⁷ Eve’s punishment in Genesis 3:16: “To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children.”

for Christ.”³⁸ For the church leader Ambrose, this process hinged on the mother’s ability to wean and attend to her children.³⁹ It was every Christian mother’s duty to mold the spirituality and moral character of her child from the very first stages of infancy.

From the upper windows of the Royal Palace,⁴⁰ Eudoxia could peer across the imperial forum to the Great Church of Constantinople, where in 398 a new bishop arrived. John Chrysostom, an upstart from the eastern city of Antioch, had a frail figure and pallid complexion from years of ascetic fasting, but he was a popular choice to lead the Church of Constantinople.⁴¹ An author of such works as *On Virginity*, *Against Remarriage*, and *The Kind of Woman Who Ought to be Taken as Wives*, John had quite a few distasteful and severe opinions about what constituted a good Christian woman. He also had no problem weaving them into his religious treatises.

Chrysostom and Eudoxia both entered the realm of Constantinopolitan elite at similar times. They both needed to build popular support, stage displays of power, and ground their authority in the local public sphere. Their goals were identical, but their methods stood fundamentally at odds with one another. The new religious authority in Constantinople integrated the Roman tradition of misogyny with a new Christian notion of *domus* (the household). Stretching back to Plutarch, *domus* along with its aspect of family and motherhood formed a central unit to

³⁸ John Chrysostom. *Homily 9 on 1 Timothy* 62.546. Supported by and expanded upon in Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 9.5.

³⁹ Ambrose, *Ep.* 63.108 translates to “*matres ablactate filios diligente eos*,” or “mothers wean your children.” Gregory of Nyssa in *On Infants’ Early Death*, writes about how infants delight in and are nurtured by the milk of their nurses, suggesting that it was well known that some mothers didn’t nurse their own children and that this cultural preference was tolerated and even configured into the writings of the Church Fathers.

⁴⁰ Mango, Cyril, *The Brazen House: A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople* (1959); Dark, Ken R., “Houses, Streets and Shops in Byzantine Constantinople from the Fifth to the Twelfth Centuries.” (2004): 83-91.

⁴¹ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.3; Kelly, J.N.D., *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom* (1998) uses medieval images to recreate John’s image. Indeed John’s mosaic in the Hagia Sophia (created a century after his lifetime) did him no favors.

Roman gender expectations.⁴² The lives of women revolved around their ability to be daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. Amid the religious changes of the later fourth century, John Chrysostom used Scripture to reduce the role and freedoms of women further. A woman, he argued, should not be allowed to “make a display of herself” outside the confines of home.⁴³ The new Christian *domus* should involve a husband becoming the master of his wife, removing her from the “vainglory” of civic life, and molding her “like wax” into a dutiful caretaker.⁴⁴ John’s reconstruction of a women’s role in the family as an intimately private matter was at odds with Eudoxia’s obligation to be a public figure. This made it necessary for Eudoxia to reconcile her contradictory statuses. She was required to cultivate a public image to be a good empress, but she must remain unseen and unheard in order to be a good Christian woman. Doomed to fall into the crevasse of exclusively feminine sin unless she became a beacon of dutiful piety, but unable to ensure her political safety or protect her children unless she adequately fulfilled her public imperial role, Eudoxia combined Christian expectation with Imperial virtue. Eudoxia’s survival depended on her ability to present herself as the perfect Christian imperial mother.

In his eulogy for Emperor Theodosius I, which was delivered just a few months before Eudoxia and Arcadius married, Bishop Ambrose combined the traditional Roman ideals of imperial motherhood with Christian piety. In line with the writings of his religious peers, Ambrose offered Helena, the mother of Constantine I, Rome’s first Christian emperor, as a paradigm for the new Christian imperial mother. He emphasized how she instilled in her son the Christian virtue worthy of an emperor. In an act of loving maternal devotion and careful guidance of her son,

⁴² Plutarch, *Moralia*.

⁴³ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 66.2.

⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily on John* 61; *On Ephesians* 204; *On Matthew* 24; and *Homily 10 Colossians 1* where John writes “[God] has made you to be loved, O Wife, that you may easily bear your subjugation...to love, therefore, is the husband’s part, to yield pertains to the other side.”

Helena journeyed to Jerusalem and, with the patronage of Christ, found the lost cross on which Jesus was crucified.⁴⁵ “She sought the nails with which the Lord was crucified, and found them. From one nail she ordered a bridle to be made, from the other she wove a diadem. She turned the one to an ornamental, the other to a devotional use. Mary was visited to liberate Eve; Helena was visited that emperors might be redeemed.”⁴⁶ She sent the relics to Constantine so that her son would wear the holy diadem and, through her efforts, transmit the “mantle of glory” to future imperial generations.⁴⁷ Helena was revered and sanctified as a saint. If Helena could be remembered as a great Christian empress, Eudoxia could too. Like Helena, Eudoxia endeavored to craft herself into the image of Christian imperial virtue.

If the salvation of their children was the business of mothers and religion was the business of emperors, then Eudoxia had a formidable operation to run. In the words of John Chrysostom, “God gave [woman] to [man], that in these (household duties), plus all other matters, she might be a helper to him.”⁴⁸ In the household of the slow-blinking Arcadius, Eudoxia became the *materfamilias*, the matriarch of the family. Eudoxia, in the emergent context of motherhood in the Christian imperial *domus*, was acting within her authority both as an empress and as a mother as she involved herself in the religious affairs of her day.

Several accounts by church historians detail Eudoxia as a religious authority in the palace. The historian Sozomen illuminates Eudoxia as a key figure in the controversies surrounding the Tall Brothers. These exiled Egyptian ascetics had been turned away by John Chrysostom when they arrived in Constantinople due to his fear of overstepping his ecclesiastical jurisdiction.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* 41-51.

⁴⁶ Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii*, 47.

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii*, 52.

⁴⁸ John Chrysostom, *The Kind of Women Who Ought to be Taken as Wives*.

⁴⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.13.

Instead, they immediately beseeched Eudoxia, who, as Sozomen presents, had already known of their plight and was set to summon an ecclesiastical council. All she asked in return was for the brothers to “pray for the emperor, for [herself], for [the imperial] children, and for the empire.”⁵⁰ Eudoxia is, foremost, portrayed by Sozomen as a devout mother whose primary concern is the health of her family and her family’s imperial business. Though her actions were those of an empress confident in her authority over ecclesiastical affairs, her character as a concerned mother is emphasized.

Elsewhere, Eudoxia is shown presenting herself as a pious mother concerned with the salvation of her children who entered church affairs to aid in this mission. It was an extremely effective concept that deeply resonated with ancient authors and consistently appeared in their texts. This is most notable in Mark the Deacon’s biography of the Bishop Porphyry of Gaza. Eudoxia’s maternal devotion features prominently in this text. A group of bishops from Gaza arrived in Constantinople to petition for the destruction of a rather pesky pagan temple. The bishops, though unable to reach John Chrysostom, used their connections to present their case in front of the heavily pregnant Eudoxia. Unbeknownst to the empress, the men had been visited by the ghost of Procopius of Scythopolis earlier in their trip who offered kindly advice on how to woo Eudoxia. He told them to “say unto her that "We hope in Christ the Son of God, if thou art zealous in the present matter, that he will give thee a male child." And when she heareth this, she will be exceedingly joyful (for she is great with child, and this is the ninth month since she conceived) and she will do all things that she may accomplish the matter for you, if God will.”⁵¹

Woo her they did. Eudoxia was so impressed with the visitors that she promised, indeed joyfully, to use all her power to fulfill their request. The next few sections of the text follow this

⁵⁰ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.13.

⁵¹ Mark the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry* 36, trans. G. F. Hill (1913).

same exchange of pleasantries—Eudoxia continues to request prayers for her family and the son that hopefully lay inside her womb, the bishops solemnly speak to the Lord on her behalf, and Eudoxia pulls strings at court. Finally, Eudoxia gives birth to her son, Theodosius II. The empress had concocted a plan at her son’s baptism that would fulfill her promise. With the help of Porphyry and an attendant, they made it seem as if Theodosius had consented to the request of the emissaries by nodding his head—an act that represented his very first imperial decision.⁵² In the end, it was Eudoxia who mediated the business administration and the divine rescript.⁵³ Mark the Deacon portrayed Eudoxia exactly as she preferred. She was a Christian imperial mother who, through her careful, nurturing femininity was able to seek Christian salvation for her son and, through her son, the Eastern Roman Empire. Eudoxia had succeeded in presenting herself as a beacon of feminine Christian virtue—but it would not be enough to save her.

Eudoxia’s contemporaries capture her fall from grace through several episodes of conflict between her and John Chrysostom. In 403, rumors floated around Constantinople that John’s sermons against female vanity and the character of “women in general” deeply offended Eudoxia.⁵⁴ “The empress immediately complained to [Arcadius]” and together they convened a church council that voted to exile John Chrysostom.⁵⁵ Though the retelling of this altercation and the breadth of Eudoxia’s involvement is rather ambiguous, it is apparent that John Chrysostom was beloved by the public of Constantinople. When he was exiled, people mobbed in marketplace to loudly proclaim the injustice, they fell to their knees and wailed on the front steps

⁵² I Mark the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry* 47.

⁵³ Mark the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry* 50.

⁵⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.15.

⁵⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.15; Sozomen, 8.16

of churches, and stormed to the gates of the imperial palace and demanded their bishop back.⁵⁶

Arcadius hastily recalled John, but Eudoxia's image had already been poisoned. Her portrayal in the written histories of her contemporaries characterize her as the emotional female antagonist with the power to condemn respected archbishops at will.

The second altercation occurs within a year of John Chrysostom's exile. One day, when John was preaching, his sermon was interrupted by a ruckus of cheers filtering in from outside the Great Church. Just across the way, in the imperial forum, a massive crowd of locals were celebrating the erection of Eudoxia's statue. Silver, draped in lifelike extravagant imperial robes, and peering down at viewers from a vaulted porphyry column, the statue was meant to memorialize the image of a loved and exalted empress.⁵⁷

John was appalled. "Immodesty, petulance, insolence, and the love of vainglory," he writes, are the natural feminine characteristics that a woman fails to grapple with when she "makes a display of herself before those who wish it with greater recklessness and impudence."⁵⁸ A firm believer in his religious authority, John refused to allow such impious behavior—outside his church door, no less—even if it was meant as tribute to the imperial mother. John Chrysostom, "employing abusive language...ridiculed" the imperial ceremony and the public honoring of Eudoxia.⁵⁹ As a contemporary, Socrates Scholasticus, describes, "the empress once more applied his expressions to herself...she therefore endeavored to procure the convocation of *another* council of bishops against him."⁶⁰ The ancient historians tell us that once again Eudoxia went and got herself offended; and once again, she vindictively exiled John. An imperial

⁵⁶ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.18; Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.16

⁵⁷ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.18; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.20

⁵⁸ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 66.2.

⁵⁹ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.18

⁶⁰ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.18. Emphasis is my own.

ceremony in honor of Eudoxia's statue and John's subsequent castigation of the public's jubilant celebration equipped the ancient pens that chronicled the empress's fall from her perfect reputation.

John Chrysostom's conflict with Eudoxia inspired both incredible support for him and vigorous opposition to his conduct.⁶¹ After his second exile and subsequent death, ancient authors worked to rewrite John's story into one of righteous suffering with a hysterical, greedy Eudoxia as the main villain. By linking John's expulsion and ultimate death with the critical role of the errant empress, they positioned the Patriarch of Constantinople against a madwoman. Just after John's death in 407, a contemporary known as pseudo-Martyrius delivered a funeral oration in which he openly branded Eudoxia as the second Jezebel who wore the imperial diadem but was "clothed in the insatiable power of greed and considerable wickedness."⁶² Socrates continued Eudoxia's comparison to another infamously sinful Biblical woman by recording John's sermon that supposedly offended Eudoxia and led to his second expulsion. It began: "Again Herodias rages...again she dances, again she seeks to have the head of John on a plate."⁶³ Sozomen, a historian active in the same period, copied Socrates' version of John's speech and Eudoxia's reaction almost exactly. And Philostorgius, who lived in Constantinople throughout Eudoxia's imperial tenure, characterized her as a woman who "had a considerable amount of audacity which

⁶¹ Palladius, *Life of St. John Chrysostom* 8-9 trans. Robert Meyer (1965); Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.5, 7, 9-17; The Synod of the Oak was held in Chalcedon in 403 and resulted in the condemnation of Chrysostom, in large part, due to the animosity and power plays of Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, and his supporters against Chrysostom. The sources allege that Eudoxia teamed with Theophilus to oust Chrysostom and then later recalled him when the public revolted.

⁶² Ps-Martyrius, *Funeral Oration* translated and quoted by Wendy Mayer in "Doing Violence to the Image of an Empress: The Destruction of Eudoxia's Reputation," (2006): pp. 207.

⁶³ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.18. The most infamous of feminine figures in the Bible, according to Kings I and II, Jezebel seduced her husband, the King Ahab, to turn away from God. Herodias conspired to kill John the Baptist and have his head served on a platter (Mark 6:19-20). Both women represented the most feminine evil.

mark[ed] barbarians,” capable of manipulating Arcadius feelings and directing his imperial intervention with her “truly feminine design.”⁶⁴

Eudoxia’s contemporaries recrafted her image of a good Christian mother into the evil female villains of the Bible. It was an extremely effective form of character assassination exclusive only to women. A century later, Zosimus offhandedly mentioned it was widely known that Theodosius, the “presumed son of Arcadius,” was born from an affair between Eudoxia and one of Arcadius’ close friends.⁶⁵ Eudoxia was unable to protect herself from the pervasive onslaught of misogynistic stereotypes even though she maintained her reputation as a good imperial mother. Motherhood was her source of power and, ultimately, the cause of her death.

In a public oration to crowds in Constantinople, pseudo-Martyrius detailed her excruciating death. In it, Eudoxia’s own corrupt feminine nature destroyed her soul and body. In 404, in her stately private imperial chambers, empress Eudoxia labored through the birth of her sixth child. Already a mother to five children, three of which survived infancy, she would have been familiar with the risks of childbirth.⁶⁶ But on this day:

There was a dead fetus in her, buried in its mother’s cavities, which, by blocking the passage of foods, turned what was recently ingested in nauseous bile and forced the bitter fluid to rush back up to her throat, and thrust what had long lain dead downwards by the weight of the [fetus] with a great rushing. Next, as may be expected to happen with a dead [fetus], floods of worms teemed forth, some quivering on top of the head of the unseen [fetus] and causing vomiting of the undigested food, other under its feet making the flux of the belly sharper and painful, and some on occasion creeping out with the mass of blood flowing forth.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.6.

⁶⁵ Zosimus, *Nova Historia* 5.18.8.

⁶⁶ Eudoxia’s daughter, Flaccilla, died in 403. In the same year, Eudoxia is alleged to have had a first miscarriage, described in ps-Martyrius, *Funeral Oration* 66 as God’s direct retribution for her first persecution of John: “The arrow flew and hit the stomach of the wretched woman, reminding her and saying: ‘Woman, in pain will you give birth to children’ (Gen 3.16), sending them forth from your stomach straight to the grave.”

⁶⁷ ps-Martyrius, *Funeral Oration* 121. Translated by Jennifer Barry in “Diagnosing Heresy: Ps.-Martyrius’s Funerary Speech for John Chrysostom,” pp. 403-412. Eudoxia’s horrible death was widely known and recorded from late antique into medieval manuscripts. Sozomen, (*Ecclesiastical History* 8.27) attributed her death to God’s retribution for her persecution of Chrysostom, and the 11th century historian, John Zonaras writes Eudoxia’s death scene as a near exact copy in *Ioannis Scylitzae Ope* 3.

The dead fetus inside her womb was left to decay for too long and obstructed the process of her vital organs. This caused Eudoxia to suffer in agony before dying. Her dreadful last moments were immortalized as the final comeuppance of a wretched woman with the audacity to tyrannize John Chrysostom and his Church. Eudoxia's Christian imperial virtue, her public image as a good, pious imperial mother was carefully dismantled by ancient authors who sought to reveal the wicked soul underneath. Contemporaries never once disagreed with the idea that Eudoxia was a great mother and loved her children, but this recognition could not redeem her impious soul in the view of later authors. Even with her last breaths, Eudoxia frantically clutched her stillborn child to her chest and, sobbing, "vomited out her soul."⁶⁸

Analysis of the birth scene from a medical perspective can be found Lascaratos, "A tragic case of complicated labour in early Byzantium (404 AD)," (2002): pp. 80-83.

⁶⁸ Psuedo-Martyrius, *Funeral Oration* 121.

The Wife

The Power Couple

In 421, the biggest social event in the lively, crowded city of Constantinople was the marriage between emperor Theodosius II and his bride, the commoner Eudocia. Though late evening on June 7th, the city streets were alight with the glow of pine torches, and the air awash with that aromatic smoke and the odors of flowers and laurels. Eudocia's first hint of the approaching wedding procession would have been the raucous chanting of the public drawing nearer to her door. Earlier in the day, Eudocia undertook the ceremonial procedure symbolizing her graduation from commoner to imperial bride by shedding her old clothing and cleansing herself in a luxurious bath. When she put on her golden, finely ornamented bridal outfit, she officially stepped into her new lifelong role as the emperor's wife. This procession symbolized the moment when that transformation would be complete.

It took place just as new Christianized wedding ceremonies supplanted aspects of traditional Roman practices. The new ceremonies called for an evolution in material, meaning, and even color associated with nuptials. Instead of the traditional handwoven *tunica recta*, Eudocia might have donned a formless white or golden tunic, her chest and shoulders obscured by a golden *palla*. Rather than the severe updo and egg-yolk colored wedding veil that resembled the headdress of the Vestal Virgins, she wore a golden veil that covered her hair and trailed down her back.⁶⁹ When she stepped out of her home and into the awaiting public crush, her beautiful face would

⁶⁹ The Mosaic of Rachel and Zipporah as Brides at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (432-440) is a great example of the new Christian wedding attire. The Biblical women were portrayed as dressed in golden and white veils, with long, highly ornamented robes and stiff *palla*. The fact that the mosaicist decided to use this representation of a bridal outfit suggests the ancient viewer would have immediately understood its meaning. Another late depiction that shows us this new wedding attire of nobles lasted into the 11th century is the Wedding at Cana in the Church of St. Nicholas Orphanos. For the description of adornment see, Gary Vikan "Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium" (1990). On tracing the early Byzantine imperial costume, Maria G. Parani, "The Byzantine Bridal Costume" (2000), and Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* (1993).

have been enhanced with makeup, the arch of her painted brow visible in the flickering orange torchlight. We can imagine how the echoes of the public wedding procession reverberated through Constantinople as the crowd escorted Eudocia to her new home in the imperial palace. Startled awake by the commotion, men, women, and children leaned out of windows from towering buildings to catch a glimpse.⁷⁰ The crowd below, so densely packed together, moved as if one continuous body was snaking through the marketplace.⁷¹ The rambunctious and intoxicated people cheered and chanted in attempts to be the loudest and the atmosphere was thick with raunchy jokes and innuendos. Eudocia, in her golden imperial bridal costume, was guided down the Mese past the Forum of Theodosius and the Forum of Constantine, through the Augustaion—in which stood the infamous statue of her predecessor, Eudoxia⁷²—and deposited at the entrance to the imperial palace. On this day, Eudocia, a young Athenian maiden, married emperor Theodosius II and became empress of the Eastern Roman Empire.⁷³

According to the *Chronicles* of the sixth-century historian John Malalas, Eudocia was selected as Theodosius' bride through the empire's first-ever bridal show.⁷⁴ By 421, the twenty-year-old Theodosius needed a wife. The emperor, much like his father, was known to possess a rather eccentric character, preferring his book collection to crafting public policy and enjoying a

⁷⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homily 12*; Gregory Nazianzus, *In Meletium*, described the procession of Theodosius through the marketplace just a few decades earlier: "the streams of fire, from the succession of lamps, flowed along the unbroken track of light, and extended so far that the eye could not reach them."

⁷¹ Themistius, *Orations* 33.5 trans. Robert J. Penella (1999).

⁷² Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.18

⁷³ The Wedding scene is reconstructed from Claudian's *Epithalamium of Honorius and Maria* and John Chrysostom's *Homily 12 on Corinthians* 12. Whereas Claudian's exaggerated description of the imperial wedding night is fraught with poetic symbolism and political undertones, Chrysostom's homily laments the excesses and the corruption of the Constantinopolitan wedding reception in a religious context. By balancing the two, I take the similarities in each account to be the somewhat normative wedding activities of the day.

⁷⁴ Treadgold, "The Byzantine World Histories of John Malalas and Eustathius of Epiphania" (2007) argues that Malalas worked off his older contemporary, Eustathius of Epiphania, who's veracity can be relied upon more than Malalas himself. Edward Watts, in "Justinian, Malalas, and the End of Athenian Philosophical Teaching in 529," speculates that Malalas must have a contact in Athens for his seemingly special access to specific sources. Either way, whether his sources can be trusted, Malalas loved telling a good story, and he must have heard this story of Eudocia's bridal show from somewhere.

friendly discourse on Scripture with local bishops rather than the political affairs at court.⁷⁵ With the support of his chastely devout sisters, Theodosius was known by the public for his virtue—he won wars through his prayer and not by his sword.⁷⁶ He had reached the age where he needed a wife who could enhance the curated image of the imperial family and provide a dynastic heir.

The union between a wife and husband took on new meaning in the fourth and fifth centuries as church leaders shaped the marriage bond into a sacramental promise between the Christian couple and the church. Writing on this relationship in the late fourth century, Ambrose lauded the marital union for nearing the most natural state of perfection because a “man without a wife is...without a home.”⁷⁷ Accordingly, as Malalas writes the story of Theodosius’s bridal show, he describes how Theodosius beseeched his older sister Pulcheria to find him an exceedingly beautiful virgin bride.⁷⁸ The daughter of a pagan sophist named Leontius, Eudocia was raised in the vibrant intellectual and philosophical atmosphere of Athens and given an extensive education by her father.⁷⁹ After her father’s death, she had traveled to Constantinople to live with her family. As if she were a character taken straight out of an ancient romance novel, Eudocia, who was renowned for her poetic eloquence and beauty, instantly caught Pulcheria’s attention and enraptured Theodosius.⁸⁰ At this point, much like her predecessor Eudoxia, Eudocia was an outsider to the religious and social scene in Constantinople. Like Arcadius’s bride, Eudocia did not bring with her political advantage or elite family connections. Instead, Pulcheria seems to have specifically chosen a bride removed from any support base in Constantinople. Eudocia, immortalized in the

⁷⁵ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22.

⁷⁶ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.23

⁷⁷ Ambrose, *On Paradise* 11.50

⁷⁸ John Malalas, *Chronicle* 14.3 trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys (1986).

⁷⁹ Socrates Scholasticus (*EH* 7.21) describes her parentage and personality; Evagrius (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.20) and Malalas (*Chronicles* 14.1), both writing in the 6th century, characterize Eudocia in the same light—her reputation as a well-studied, well-cultured woman carried throughout late antiquity into the modern age.

⁸⁰ Just as in the second or third century ancient Greek novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe* by Chariton. In the novel, Chaereas was dazzled by both Callirhoe’s extraordinary beauty and chastity and they both instantly fell in love.

texts of her contemporaries as Theodosius's exceptionally bright and beloved wife, was, on the day of her wedding, a newly-baptized Christian woman, far from home, and completely at the mercy of her new family.

In those first hours, Eudocia's glaring vulnerability at court must have struck her with sudden, horrible realization. Even as the wedding celebration occurred around her in the palace, her head must have been swirling with anxieties amidst the opulent "thread[ed] rhythm of dances and sing songs."⁸¹ John Chrysostom once described the "trembling soul" of the bride who wondered what would happen if she, so radiantly beautiful, still failed to captivate Theodosius for long?⁸² Or whether Theodosius would prove a cruel husband? As she sat with her new husband at the reception, the imperial court's network of alliances and enemies shifted before her eyes, and even at that moment factions of courtiers competing for power, pointedly in full view of Theodosius, supplicated the new bride. In Athens, Eudocia heard of the wise Theodosius and his pious sisters, but she would not have been privy to the secretive plotting of courtiers and the acting-matriarch Pulcheria in a shifting, continuous struggle for power and individual ambition.⁸³ These people were not her friends. It was completely unfamiliar, strange territory. Only on that night, when she arrived at the palace dressed in her wedding costume, would she have discovered this one fact: her husband was her only ally.

Even in early fifth-century Athens, where traditional Roman religion was still formed the heart of civic and cultural life, Eudocia would have been aware that the Christian ideal of marriage was a partnership of equals. This was evident in jewelry across the eastern Mediterranean.

⁸¹ Luxoriis. *Epithalamium Fridi* 18-24.

⁸² John Chrysostom. *On Virginity* 57.1-2

⁸³ Especially because Eudocia did not have any high-ranking relatives involved in state-level administration, which comes later. For more on the power competition at court, J. Harris, "Men Without Women: Theodosius' Consistory and the Business of Government," in *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (2013): pp. 67-89.



On the left: Marriage Ring with Facing Busts Inscribed with Couple's Names from Constantinople, late 4th century.⁸⁴ On the right: Gemstone Ring with Clasped Hands from the Eastern Mediterranean, 5th century.⁸⁵

Golden rings that captured the essence of the power couple displayed two facing busts of equal size with the cross joining them in holy matrimony. These dual bust-length portraits of married couples echo the tradition used by co-emperors on imperial coins to represent and demonstrate their equal power. Another continuity from the earlier Roman Empire, but with Christian overtones, was the ceremonial clasping of right hands. Rings and portraits of clasped hands took on new meaning with inscriptions of “omonia” or harmony, which signaled a marriage tied together through an emotional bond and partnership. Though a symbolic and romantic image of Christian matrimony, marriages were seldom a partnership of equals. In Eudocia’s case, her legitimacy and power rested on her ability work in tandem with Theodosius to publicly present a marital bond united in piety and affection. From the day of her marriage, Eudocia would be scrutinized, judged, and rewritten through her status as the Emperor’s wife.

Eudocia and Theodosius’s wedding night culminated in the bridal chamber, where their marriage was consummated. As John Chrysostom taught, the most significant reason for marriage

⁸⁴ From Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington D.C. Others like this symbolic ideal of the power couple: "Seal Ring with Facing Busts," Constantinople late 4th early 5th, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, 47.18. "Marriage Seal Ring with Facing Busts," late 4th early 5th, Berry Collection 76.86.19. Another identical depiction: The Menil Collection, X490.744.

⁸⁵ From Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Others like it: Marriage of David and Michal, Early 7th, The Cyprus Museum. "Gold Ring with Clasped Hands," Berry Collection, 65. 87.31, from the 3rd-4th C. "Gemstone Ring with Clasped Hands," Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 63.1555, from the 5th C. For more on this see, A. Walker, "Wife and Husband: A Golden Team," in *Byzantine Women and Their World* (2002).

was to keep a couple chaste by containing their lustful urges.⁸⁶ The virtue of the relationship rested on the couple's love and affection for each other—not lust.⁸⁷ Though the concept of marriage continued to promote civic engagement and celebration, its traditional Roman ideal for upholding the social order and the reinforcing virtue of citizenship was superseded by the private piety and self-restraint expected within Christian marriages. “Pleasure, craftily offered, began the Fall,” wrote Gregory of Nyssa, “and there followed after pleasure shame, and fear” of the sinful thoughts and emotions shared between Eve and Adam.⁸⁸ Marriage and married intercourse were the “last stage of [Eve and Adam’s] separation from the life that was led in Paradise.” Like the first Biblical marriage partners, the contemporary imperial married couple of Eudocia and Theodosius were expected to be paradigms of the Christian harmonious partnership by grappling with temptation and thwarting lust in their marital bed. The imperial couple wore two sets of crowns that day—a physical crown at the coronation, and a spiritual crown upon their victory over carnal pleasure on their marital bed.⁸⁹ Like Helena’s holy diadem for her son Constantine, it would become Eudocia’s duty as the new imperial wife to transmit the “mantle of glory” to her son, the next imperial heir.⁹⁰

A year later, in 422, Eudocia and Theodosius’s only child was born—a girl. No longer a virgin and never to be a mother to the imperial heir, Eudocia’s position as imperial wife was in a state of vulnerability. In order to survive the machinations of court she needed her status as the imperial wife to become a source of authority. Eudocia endeavored to present herself as the perfect Christian imperial wife. Socrates later writes that the empress had taken vows to perform

⁸⁶ John Chrysostom. *On Virginitiy*; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginitiy* 7

⁸⁷ John Chrysostom. *Homily 10 Col 1*

⁸⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginitiy* 12

⁸⁹ John Chrysostom. *Homily 9 on 1 Timothy*.

⁹⁰ Ambrose.,*De obitu Theodosii* 50.

a pilgrimage to Jerusalem after her daughter had married.⁹¹ In 437, with her daughter newly married to Emperor Valentinian III and relocated to Rome, the palace was empty of imperial children.⁹² Eudocia set out to Jerusalem that same year laden with wealth and expensive presents for the major churches on the way.⁹³ With her authority as wife to the emperor, Eudocia received a jubilant reception in Antioch before reaching Jerusalem.⁹⁴ Over the next decade Eudocia trekked to Jerusalem two more times “adorned its churches with the most costly gifts” each time and on her returns to Constantinople, “decorated all the churches in the other cities of the East with a variety of ornaments.”⁹⁵ The products of Eudocia’s Christian imperial virtue was visible in cities across the empire. In the texts of her contemporaries, Eudocia was an exemplary paradigm of a pious, devoted imperial wife. Her good reputation does not last.

John Malalas, the same sixth century chronicler that told of Eudocia and Theodosius’s union, elucidated their bitter separation. The tale is a familiar one. One day, in the royal palace of Constantinople, the emperor Theodosius II was given the largest, juiciest, most admirable apple. Theodosius thought such an exquisite apple should belong to an equally praiseworthy person, his wife Eudocia. The empress immediately regifted the apple to Paulinus, Theodosius’s best friend and her secret lover. Paulinus then regifted the apple back into the hands of Theodosius. At once, Theodosius recognized the fruit but thought to ask his wife, “where is the apple which I sent you?” to which Eudocia supposedly lied, “I ate it.”⁹⁶ For this reason the imperial couple separated, and Theodosius was forced to sentence his best friend Paulinus to death. Humiliated, “for it was known

⁹¹ Socrates Scholasticus, 7.44.

⁹² Socrates, 7.45; Licinia Eudoxia and Valentinian’s wedding coin: RIC 10 Valentinian III.2074

⁹³ Socrates, 7.45; for more on Eudocia’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem see Clark, “Claims on the Bones of St. Stephen: The Partisans of Melania and Eudocia,” (1982): 141-156

⁹⁴ Evagrius, 2.21.

⁹⁵ Socrates, 7.47; Evagrius, 2.20-22.

⁹⁶ John Malalas, *Chronicle* 14.2.

everywhere that Paulinus was executed on her account,” Eudocia left to find salvation in Jerusalem.⁹⁷

John Malalas’ story of the apple was not afforded any mention in the texts of Eudocia’s contemporaries and remained controversial even in his own time. The narrative, however, reappears in later writings of influential ancient scholars across the empire. The story is retold in the seventh century *Chronicon Paschale* and John Nikiu’s *Chronicle*, and in Theophanes the Confessor’s eighth century *Chronicle*.⁹⁸ The misogynistic stereotypes of feminine adultery and deceit provided an effective avenue for the authors to manipulate Eudocia’s image in a way that served their own contemporary ends. Eudocia’s status as imperial wife was her source of power and, ultimately, the cause of her disgrace.

⁹⁷ John Malalas, *Chronicle* 14.1-3.

⁹⁸ Braccini traces the large-scale spread of Eudocia’s apple story through land and time in “An Apple between Folktales, Rumors, and Novellas: Malalas 14.8 and Its Oriental Parallels.” (2018): 301–308.

The Virgin

Saving it for Jesus

Over half a decade before Eudocia joined the family, another sort of imperial wedding took place in 414. Pulcheria and her sisters stepped from the palace into the Great Church of Constantinople in a massive public procession to make their vows to their bridegroom Jesus Christ. Unlike the crowd on Eudocia's wedding day, the people gathered along the short route were notably more sober and respectful in consideration of the religious significance of the ceremonial proceedings. The empresses might have been swathed in loose white robes to symbolize their intended vows of ascetic chastity and carried torches aflame in the physical embodiment of their eternal virginity—the “lamp burning with the light of good will.”⁹⁹ Of these three brides, it was Pulcheria who consecrated a holy table on the altar, draped her imperial garment over it, and mounted a portrait of herself on the wall above.¹⁰⁰ Pulcheria's table, garment, and image would have gazed down at the church visitors from the altar and rested pointedly in the central place of Christian worship for at least a decade.¹⁰¹ Given the visual association with the empress in such a religiously charged space, her presence in the church linked her pious virginity with imperial prerogative. Who was Pulcheria to the Constantinopolitan public? They need only to turn their

⁹⁹ Quotation taken from Ambrose, *Concerning Widows* 8.1 and the continuous use of the torch metaphor in John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* are supported by *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* Discourse XI 2-3: “O virgins...meet the Bridegroom in white robes, and with torches towards the east.”; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 3, “[the virgin] in her white attire.”

¹⁰⁰ Pulcheria had an altar table built and her declaration of ascetic virginity etched into it for everyone to view and remember her by (Soz. *EH* 9.1)—also supported by an archeological find of Pulcheria's Inscription at The Great Church (Holum, pp. 93)—It is only in Nestorius' *Letter to Cosmas* that we understand Pulcheria also allegedly placed her outer garment on the table as a tablecloth and above it an image of herself that would have sat at the head of the church and above the bishop as he held a service. If both were true, Pulcheria would have symbolically consecrated the body of Christ in the church and also draped her own robe over Him—acting in the place of Mary. For more on this altar table-robe-Mary connection see: Judith Mary Foster “Giving Birth to God: The Virgin Empress Pulcheria and Imitation of Mary in Early Christian Greek and Syriac Traditions”

¹⁰¹ The Nestorius source doesn't give a date but we know Nestorius was patriarch from 428 to 431 and can assume it occurred in the animosity leading up to the Council of Ephesus.

heads from the imperial palace to the Great Church. She was the imperial Bride of Christ.¹⁰² She was the virgin empress whose marriage formed the religious and political glue that bound the imperial family closer to God.



The Virgin Mary crowned by the hand of Jesus Christ in a mosaic from the Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Rome.¹⁰³

Before she had even reached ten years old, Pulcheria had lost both her parents and was left to fend for herself and protect her younger siblings from the unyielding imperial court.

¹⁰² Pseudo-Athanasius, *Apologia as Constantium* 33.49 defines the term “Bride of Christ” as a symbolic but no less weighty life commitment to pious celibacy. Brides of Christ were usually martyred young women whose ascetic virginity exemplified their wholesome purity and chastity. On the other hand, men who committed to an ascetic life of celibacy were not called Brides of Christ and their devotion was described in more masculine terms. For more, see Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia University Press, 2008; Clark, “Vitiated Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past,” in *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*: 291-350.

¹⁰³ Created about a century after Pulcheria’s lifetime. This was an explicit representation of what Pulcheria hoped to accomplish with her public vows of chastity—tying Mary and Mary’s divine feminine power to female imperial power. In this mosaic, Mary is a Byzantine empress, just like Pulcheria.

When her mother, Eudoxia, died suddenly in childbirth in 404 Pulcheria was not yet six years old. Though she lived in the magnificent palace of Constantinople and was surrounded by her parents' lavish court, the loss of her mother must have been a deep ache—especially as she continued to progress from childhood into maturity. She didn't have a mother to guard her from the intricacies of court or to closely train her in both properly traditional aristocratic behavior and the new virtuous attributes expected of Christian noblewomen.¹⁰⁴ Pulcheria would be unable to share in an affectionate and tender relationship with her mother, never able to run into Eudoxia's arms to be embraced and comforted.¹⁰⁵ The sense of loss must have been amplified further with her father Arcadius's untimely passing four years later. The single father left his three young daughters and eight-year-old son vulnerable to the machinations of the court.

Emperor Arcadius was known to be idle and a bit dopey, but many of the people around him certainly were not. A constantly shifting competition for power and influence among courtiers furnished the backdrop of palace life. The career of a courtier was filled with movement, fueled by ambition, and sustained through individual talents. The system rewarded competence with power. This court culture was such an integral part of the imperial system that there was a smooth transition of power between the adult Arcadius and the young Theodosius when Arcadius died.¹⁰⁶ The courtier Anthemius, working in partnership with the sophist Troilus, became Theodosius' regent and conducted state affairs in his name.¹⁰⁷ The duo was highly effective and, with the mutual benefit of Anthemius' tactful politics and Troilus' eloquent diplomacy, they commissioned the

¹⁰⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily 9 in 1 Timothy*

¹⁰⁵ Mothers gained a distinctly more maternal and affectionate role in the late empire, as argued in Douglas O'Roark, "Parenthood in Late Antiquity: The Evidence of Chrysostom" (1999).

¹⁰⁶ When news of Arcadius' death reached the general Stilicho and emperor Honorius in the west they decided to forgo any attempt at seeking guardianship of Theodosius and uniting the empire under their rule (Zosimus, *New History* 3.31-3). This decision, admittedly, was in part due to the military threats that occupied them in the West. However, the fact that they did not regard the eight-year-old emperor as vulnerable means they must have regarded the powerful courtiers as a competent and significant threat not worth the effort of engaging with.

¹⁰⁷ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.1.

construction of the defensive Theodosian Walls around Constantinople.¹⁰⁸ The court was still coming into itself just like the young imperial city itself. At this time the city was becoming a cultural center of the empire with the palace serving as a beacon to intellectual and religious leaders.

This industrious spirit permeated daily palace life, influenced powerful families, and even touched the imperial siblings. By flexing their familial connections and keeping in contact with their close-knit circle of school friends, courtiers used their intellectual and social status to curry favor with the imperial family and influence their position at court. Courtiers, both women and men, formed alliances based off their extended family networks and shared intellectual interests or religious devotion. The elite men who surrounded Pulcheria and her siblings were bound by an intricate web of school alliances built in both seminaries and traditional schools. Anthemius and Troilus, for example, were members of the same large, well-connected circle of Hellenic school friends.¹⁰⁹ Women did not have access to the same educational opportunities as men but instead formed family-based networks through their roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. The same responsibility was to be expected of Pulcheria and her sisters. As they reached maturity, any elite unmarried man, and many sons of the Roman nobility, would have been scurrying to gain entrance into the imperial family through an advantageous imperial marriage.

The young Theodosian empresses challenged this old model for how imperial women functioned in public life. The social values of womanhood were undergoing a sharp transformation from traditional Roman praises of motherhood and wifely virtue to the popularity of Christian

¹⁰⁸ Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (1982): pp. 86-88.

¹⁰⁹ Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* 86-87, including other major figures such as Synesius, Aurelian, and several prefects (Synesius, *Letters*, 101, 119). The system of education for elite men in the late Roman Empire created a special social code of tight-knit educated elites, more on this: E. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (2008).

female asceticism. In the late fourth century writers championed ascetic virginity as the most exalted Christian lifestyle for a woman, even over devoted marriage or dutiful motherhood.¹¹⁰ It was hard for Pulcheria to overlook the monastery that attracted and housed female ascetics from all over the Eastern Mediterranean that rested right beside the Great Church of Constantinople and within sight of the palace.¹¹¹ Erected by Olympias, a member of one of the most elite political families in the city and aunt to a courtier in Pulcheria's entourage, the building was constructed in the last years of the fourth century. It might have been the first monastery for women in Constantinople.¹¹² Olympias's devotion to Christian asceticism would have been common knowledge among the palace officials. Praised extravagantly for her ascetic chastity and pious character, her ability to exude "intelligence without conceit, charity without limits... [and] immeasurable self-control," Olympias was honored for her religious devotion more than any of her peers were honored for their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.¹¹³ It would have been obvious to Pulcheria that Christian ascetism stripped women of the negative qualities attributed to femininity and allowed them unique freedoms and individual power.

Writing in the late fourth century about the life of his pious virgin sister, Macrina, bishop Gregory of Nyssa attempted to reconcile the paradox between his empowered sister and the negative stereotypes of women: "If indeed she was a woman, for I am not sure it is right to refer to someone by their sex when she had transcended her sex...[Macrina was] a woman who, by the means of her Christian faith raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue."¹¹⁴ A women's

¹¹⁰ Virginity was no longer a condition but a profession, a lifestyle in which a woman was a "sacred vessel dedicated to the Lord" (Eusebius of Emesa, *On Virginity* 16.18). See also: Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*; Pseudo-Athanasius, *On Virginity*; Augustine, *On Virginity*; Basil of Ancyra, *Of True Virginity*; Clement of Alexandria, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity*; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*; John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*.

¹¹¹ *Life of Olympias* 1 translated by Elizabeth Clark in "Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ," pg. 50

¹¹² *Life of Olympias* 6

¹¹³ *Life of Olympias* 6

¹¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 1 trans. Caroline White (2010).

declaration of pious virginity severed the ties to gender and sexuality that had so often negatively defined the female persona that was so easily slandered by men in antiquity. A woman could no longer be dismissed as a harlot, a temptress, or an adulteress if she took solemn vows of virginity before God. Female ascetic virgins from influential families such as Macrina and Olympias were offered no less freedom than their peers who became mothers and wives, and they rose to new heights of fame.

Gregory of Nyssa and his peers Gregory Nazianzus and John Chrysostom,¹¹⁵ both of whom were patriarchs of Constantinople, worked to revise the meaning of femininity from the sin of Eve to the redemption of Mary.¹¹⁶ In doing this, they offered women an avenue towards independence from the social constraints tied to the traditional female roles. Wealthy women who were inspired to undertake ascetic renunciations could live under the guidance of God rather than under a husband or father. This sentiment must have been attractive to Pulcheria who, as the eldest orphaned imperial daughter in a court of ambitious men, lacked concrete control over her or her family's lives. Pulcheria's freedom from the political and social constraints of her imperial status rested on her ability to become the perfect imperial Christian virgin.

It is easy to see parallels between the decisions of Pulcheria and Macrina. Both dedicated their virginity to Christ before they reached marriageable age. Pulcheria might have heard the story of Macrina's life through her acquaintance, Olympia, niece to Olympias and a member of a family network that included three patriarchs of Constantinople and four eastern church leaders.¹¹⁷ In her

¹¹⁵ Chrysostom was also good buddies with Olympias and wrote to her regularly in his *Letters to Olympias*.

¹¹⁶ Gregory Nazianzus, *Orations* 37.7 and John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*

¹¹⁷ It is with reasonable confidence that I assert that Pulcheria, if not read, had access to the story of Macrina's life through an extensive network of familial and friendship connections. Olympia was in Pulcheria's retinue, Olympia's aunt was Olympias who was raised by her brother Ablabios and his wife Theodosia (Naz., *Carmen ad Olympiadem*) Theodosia and her brother Amphilochius—who was the proto-feminist bishop of Iconium—were cousins with Gregory Nazianzus (PLRE “Amphilochius”; “Theodosia” 2). Gregory Nazianzus was close school friends with Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa who were brothers to Macrina (Naz., *Funeral Oration on Basil* 43). Through their friendship, Basil was also good friends with Amphilophius (Basil, *Treatise on the Holy Spirit*). It's

education, Macrina devoted herself to Scripture, especially “those passages of the Wisdom of Solomon conducive to a moral life,” and dedicated her free time to memorizing psalms.¹¹⁸ Both Macrina and Pulcheria, it seems, were aware of their status as women in a highly patriarchal society, and they understood at an early age that feminine ascetism offered them an alternative lifestyle. Both women were also mentors to their younger brothers. As a young girl Macrina raised her brother, Peter, even though she was hardly older than him. In her natural wisdom, she “educated him in all higher forms of learning, training him from childhood on the Scriptures.” Macrina was her younger brother’s parent, mentor, and teacher. Likewise, though just two years older than Theodosius, Pulcheria became her brother’s primary guide and mentor. She molded him into a good Christian emperor by teaching him how to pray and guiding him to cherish Christian ritual and theological discourse. Both women knew the Scriptures by heart and grew steadfast in their knowledge and practice of Christianity. Macrina and Pulcheria turned their homes into monasteries. Pulcheria’s transformation of the imperial rooms into a cloister helped to insulate her family from the politics of court. Deep familial bonds weaved both stories together. Pulcheria loved her family and found a way to fiercely protect of her siblings in a society where even the highest orders of women had few opportunities for independence.

When Pulcheria declared her renunciation of traditional marriage in 414, she refused to allow herself or her sisters to be torn from the safety of the palace and thrown into a political union.

highly plausible that Olympias, Olympia, and their notable political family would take every opportunity to express their close relationship with some of the most famous church leaders of their time. More convincing evidence—Pulcheria read and spoke in Latin and Greek (Soz., *EH*, 9.1) and she was obviously highly invested in consuming religious texts and adopting the monastic lifestyle.

¹¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 3. The Wisdom of Solomon, about the personification of wisdom in a feminine form that mentors and guides King Solomon, was extremely popular reading for ascetic virgins in the 4th and 5th centuries: Clark, “The Uses of the Song of Songs: Origen and the Later Latin Fathers,” in *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith* (1986): 386-427; Hunter, David G. “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.” *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 281–303.

Pulcheria's ascetic virginity was an inspiring choice to the public and a strategic roadblock to ambitious courtiers. Pulcheria purposely organized a massive public procession through Constantinople, she performed solemn vows in the central Great Church, and consecrated an inscribed altar table meant to permanently announce her ascetic piety through time. Pulcheria's decision to declare her pious virginity in a grand public statement squashed any argument, any malicious rumor, that could be raised by antagonistic courtiers.¹¹⁹ By imitating Mary's venerated virginity, Pulcheria made it nearly impossible to slander her character without also attacking the Virgin Mary by association. It was Pulcheria's first choice in a set of decisions that speaks to her newfound empowerment and independence.

There was more to Pulcheria's decision than simply embracing celibacy over marriage. Usually, a person's ascetic renunciation required them to sacrifice their comfort, donate all their material wealth, and cut ties with family members. The stories circulating through noble family networks celebrated resolute mothers leaving behind tearful children and the wealthiest of elites petitioning imperial court so they could give all their wealth to the church instead of leaving it to their family members.¹²⁰ Pulcheria could not do this. She stayed in the palace, enjoying her newfound independence while involving herself in her brother's governance of the empire. She participated so thoroughly that her contemporaries alleged she not only "governed the Roman empire," but restructured it "with great orderliness; she concerted her measures so well that the affairs to be carried out were quickly decreed and completed."¹²¹ Whether she did become a regent

¹¹⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.1.

¹²⁰ Both stories come from the same family, Pulcheria and Eudocia would meet The Younger. Melania the Elder left behind her son to set out on a pilgrimage through the Eastern Mediterranean (Palladius, *Life of Melania*). Her son's daughter, also Melania, lamented the fact that her family sought her wealth after hearing of her renunciation, so held a personal meeting with Serena at court to protest her family's inheritance in favor of donating her wealth to church (Gerontius, *Melania the Younger*). The *Letters of Barsunuphius and John* catalogue how earnestly some nobles seek to leave behind their lives but are prevented from doing so by their rigid social structure.

¹²¹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.1.

for her brother or just a matriarchal figure in his private life, Pulcheria's renunciation granted her credibility in a political capacity and the independence of choice. As Elizabeth Clark describes, the earth was Pulcheria's before her ascetic renunciation, and she appears to have sacrificed little and gained more in her adoption of ascetism.¹²²

By far, Pulcheria's status as the imperial virgin granted her more power, security, and independence than her mother or sister-in-law. She declared her pious chastity during an era when the values of womanhood were undergoing a sharp transformation from the traditional praises of motherhood and wifehood into the Christian virtue of ascetic virginity. By doing this, Pulcheria grasped the opportunity to shape the new world into one in which a woman could gain political and religious authority through her Christian virtue. Like Olympias, Macrina, and most significantly the Virgin Mary, Pulcheria's virginity "raised her to the highest peak of human virtue."¹²³ From the very top, Pulcheria fell the hardest.

¹²² Clark, Elizabeth. "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity." (1986): pp. 190. She refers to noble women in general within the late fourth century.

¹²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 1

The Fall

A Tale as Old as Time...

In 430, the imperial family found themselves caught in the crosshairs of yet another empire-wide religious controversy. From his episcopal see in Egypt nearly three thousand miles away, patriarch Cyril of Alexandria sent two separate letters, one to Eudocia and Theodosius and another to Pulcheria, about the heresy stirring up in Constantinople. In his letters, Cyril made sure to link the mounting religious controversy directly back to both the empresses' feminine imperial piety. He urged the empresses to “decorate their holy heads with apostolic laurels” by guiding Theodosius to side with Cyril against Nestorius, the upstart Patriarch of Constantinople.¹²⁴

When Theodosius learned of the separate letters he was incensed by Cyril's audacity and wrote a scorching letter to Cyril. “What sense was there in writing one letter to [me] and the most pious Augusta Eudocia my spouse” Theodosius began, “and a different letter to my sister the most pious Augusta Pulcheria? Or did you think that we were in disagreement or hope that we would be in disagreement as a result of your righteousness' letters?”¹²⁵ Whether attempting to provoke or exploit a rift in the imperial family, Cyril certainly thought it worth the breach in propriety. He had identified how the imperial family's divine rule rested on their ability to successfully navigate the precarious balancing act between the competing interests of church leaders, the public, and their personal beliefs. The continued success and longevity of the Theodosian dynasty depended on their ideal public image in which the Empire and the Church cooperated to uphold orthodoxy.

¹²⁴ Titled *Address to the Most Pious Empresses on the Correct Faith* and *Address to the Most Pious Princesses*, Holum (1982) summarizes their focus on *Theotokos* and Marian piety in *Theodosian Empresses*, (pp. 160). The letters Cyril sent to important men in the imperial capital where he makes no mention of *Theotokos*: Cyril, *Letter 71 To Emperor Theodosius*; *Letter 97 To Emperor Theodosius Fragments*; *Letter 100 To Monks at Constantinople on the Faith*; *Sacra ad Cyrillum Alex* translated by S. Wessel in *Cyril: from Egypt to the Imperial City* (2004): pg. 22, 232.

¹²⁵ Theodosius, *Letter to Cyril of Alexandria* 29.3 translated by Richard Price in *The Council of Ephesus of 431* (2020). All documents from the proceedings of the Council of Ephesus I use are translated by Price.

As a paradigm of feminine imperial piety, Pulcheria was submerged into the power games of religious controversy.

The roots of the controversy stretched back to the spring of 428, when Theodosius removed Nestorius, “a stranger from Antioch,” from his suburban monastery and placed him in Constantinople’s vacant bishopric as an attempt to cut through the vicious rivalries consuming the local church.¹²⁶ When Nestorius became Patriarch that April 10, it appeared that “the monks agreed not with the clergy, nor had the clergy one purpose, and the bishops were divided, and the people were likewise divided.”¹²⁷ The imperial family needed the next Patriarch of Constantinople to be someone who could control the disruptive church politics and who would be “loved by all men for his words and his manner of life and who would be a teacher of the churches and the mouth of all men.”¹²⁸ Nestorius, an outsider to the religious scene of the city but an artful orator and dedicated ascetic, seemed to be an appealing candidate. But just five days after his ordination, Nestorius fumbled into a doctrinal dispute about Mary that would become a major religious controversy.

Nestorius’s position was weaker than he imagined. He was plucked from his humble monastery and supplanted some native clergy who had been furiously campaigning for the position. Underneath the public political and religious administration of Constantinople lay a network of ambitious clergymen and their influential patrons. Veins stretched from the local cloisters, through wealthy Christian ascetic circles and prudent courtiers and all the way to the imperial family. This meant that, when Theodosius and Eudocia endowed Nestorius with the foremost religious post in the Eastern Empire, they snubbed Pulcheria’s ally Proclus.

¹²⁶ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.29.

¹²⁷ Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* 2.1, pp. 275 trans. Driver and Hodgson (1925).

¹²⁸ Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* 2.1, pp. 274

Proclus was a well-known figure in Constantinople, a secretary of the former Patriarch Atticus who was rumored to have been a student to John Chrysostom, and he was a strong contender to become the next Patriarch in 428.¹²⁹ It is easy to imagine, then, the satisfaction Proclus must have felt when Nestorius blundered into doctrinal quarrel over popular veneration of the Mary Theotokos, the Mother of God.¹³⁰ Whereas the dominant Christian ideology of Nestorius' hometown Antioch, emphasized Christ's humanity, the Church in Constantinople followed that of Alexandria in stressing Christ's divinity. The distinction mattered because it explained the significance of the birth of Jesus.

Nestorius claimed that "He is human who was born of the Blessed Mary...by nature [she is] the mother of a man"¹³¹ and explained that a divine figure could not be birthed by a human. This meant that Jesus was human, and Mary was just an ordinary woman. By bringing this theological framework to Constantinople and attempting to enforce it as orthodox, Nestorius deeply offended the locals and inspired a widespread public unrest. A critical point was reached during the Feast of Theotokos in 430 when Proclus presented a sermon on the Virgin Mary with Nestorius in the audience. "What we celebrate is the pride of women and the glory of the female, thanks to the one who was both mother and virgin," Proclus announced, "let women be honored...let virgins be glorified!"¹³² Proclus galvanized the public of Constantinople with his speech in defense of the Virgin Mary Theotokos and emphasized the problematic nature of Nestorius's claims. News of the controversy soon spread beyond the imperial city and throughout the empire.

¹²⁹ N. Constatas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in late Antiquity* (2003): pp. 10-24.

¹³⁰ Twenty years after the fact, Nestorius defended his initial involvement in Constantinople by alleging that he had "found that men were inquiring [after the "correct" faith] and were in need of being taught," and that he merely "yielded to their persuasion...after factions of the people who were questioning this came together to the bishop's palace." (*Bazaar of Heracleides* 1.3).

¹³¹ Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* 2.1.

¹³² Proclus, *Homily 1* 5-10.

The heat of the argument prompted Theodosius to call a church Council in Ephesus after he felt intense outside pressure to resolve the issue. In June 431, the Roman Empire's wisest and most respected bishops, united "through love of God and a will of mutual affection," gathered in Ephesus to solemnly end the doctrinal controversy.¹³³ Gregory Nazianzus, after the council of 381, said he had "never seen a good outcome to any synod...[that] rivalries and maneuvers always prevailed over reason."¹³⁴ The council of Ephesus would be no different. Cyril of Alexandria, described by an Antiochene bishop as a "wretch" "sated with evil," who immediately took control of the council and excommunicated Nestorius.¹³⁵

Nestorius, characterized by Cyril as "blinded by madness and cruel in his wickedness," then gathered a different council, in protest, just outside the Church of Mary with his Antiochene allies in which they excommunicated Cyril.¹³⁶ Incredulous and not to be outdone, Cyril's supporters, still inside the church, excommunicated the entire Antiochene party. All the while, the bishops raced each other with letters to tattle to Theodosius, who was still in Constantinople. When the emperor finally received word of the chaos, he vindictively signed an order to depose and imprison them all. In the end, though, Nestorius was the only bishop to be punished fully.¹³⁷ Cyril returned to his bishopric just a few months later and the Antiochene party reluctantly accepted the ecclesiastical canons of the Council of Ephesus. Mary was canonized as the Theotokos and Nestorius was condemned and exiled.

The unruly proceedings and, to many, unpalatable outcome of Council of Ephesus eviscerated a deep fissure in the integrity the eastern Church that finally shattered just a few years

¹³³ Theodosius, *Letter 28*.

¹³⁴ Gregory Nazianzus, *Letter 130*. Translated and edited by Charles Freeman in *A.D. 381* (2008): pp. 97.

¹³⁵ Theodoret, *Letter 180 On the Death of Cyril*, trans. NPNF II.3.

¹³⁶ Cyril, *Homily 4 at Ephesus*.

¹³⁷ Cyril, *Homily 4 at Ephesus; Council of Ephesus Canons*, 1-8.

after Theodosius' death in 450. The emperor spent over a decade painstakingly patching up the bitter wounds and mending the hurt feelings of the church leaders when he died unexpectedly without leaving an heir. With Eudocia on pilgrimage in Jerusalem and Theodosius's only daughter married to Valentinian III, the emperor in the west, Pulcheria was left in charge.

She needed to act quickly to preserve her influence. Theodosius's death put her in the precarious position of becoming an insignificant leftover from her brother's administration. Pulcheria was once again left with little choice, and so responded by marrying the military officer Marcian on the condition that she would maintain her pious virginity, thus maintaining her source of religious authority while safeguarding her family's throne.¹³⁸



On the left, the Obverse, we (sort of) see Marcian's front facing profile. On the right, the Reverse, we see Pulcheria on the right and Marcian on the left, being crowned by the figure of Christ between them.¹³⁹

The earliest evidence of Pulcheria and Marcian's marriage were coins first issued in August 450 that show on their reverse an image of Pulcheria and Marcian clasping right hands and united by

¹³⁸ Evagrius, 2.1.

¹³⁹ Marriage solidus of Marcian from 450 AD=RIC 10 Marcian.502, Constantinople. Image from Hungarian Museum and Art Gallery.

the figure of Christ between them. The legend reads FELICITER NUBTIIS, “Happy Marriage.” Pulcheria’s first accomplishment as empress, with the aid of Marcian, was to convene the Council of Chalcedon in 451, a gathering that attempted to restore peace to the Church following the discord that had continued from the Council of Ephesus. The Council agreed to the Chalcedonian Creed, a document that did not appease everyone and immediately resulted in more schisms of the church. The divisive theological controversies and their resulting acrimonious church councils in the fifth century formed a vacuum in historical memory. The winners—the anti-Nestorians after 431 and the Chalcedonians after 451—left out any mention of Pulcheria’s involvement in either controversy.¹⁴⁰ Her stake in the matter of Theotokos, any shred of personal feeling that would inspire her to pull strings at court or graciously receive a letter from Cyril of Alexandria is erased from the historical record. Pulcheria only materializes alongside the chaos and evil in the texts of slighted church leaders and their sympathetic historians. Just like her mother Eudoxia and her sister-in-law Eudocia, Pulcheria’s self-presentation of Christian imperial virginity and her involvement in ecclesiastical matters was a source of her power but, ultimately, also easily accessible ammunition for miffed ancient authors to corrupt her image.

Pulcheria’s marriage offered Nestorius an opening to slander her pure image almost twenty years after his condemnation at the Council of Ephesus. In 450, Nestorius wrote *The Bazaar of Heracleides* to catalogue the wrongs he suffered. At Ephesus “Cyril was [his] persecutor and the accuser,”¹⁴¹ but, in Constantinople, Nestorius claimed it was Pulcheria who led the fight against

¹⁴⁰ Socrates and Theodoret make no mention of Pulcheria’s involvement with Nestorius, good or bad. Evagrius, a pro-Chalcedonian, sings extensive praise for Marcian but does not mention Pulcheria in relation to the council at all (*EH* 2.1-3). To Sozomen, Pulcheria is an exemplary Christian, and to Philostorgius she was her brother’s administrative regent (*EH* 9.1, 3; *HE* 12.7).

¹⁴¹ Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* 2.1.

him because he “was not willing to be persuaded by her demand that [he] should compare a woman corrupted of men to the Bride of Christ.”¹⁴² Nestorius alleged that she targeted him so persistently because he was privy to the knowledge that Pulcheria was not a pious virgin but a “contentious” harlot.

Nestorius’s followers, affectionally referred to as Nestorians, continued the attack after his death in 451. They portrayed the bishop as the second John Chrysostom who, like Chrysostom, also had the misfortune to encounter the wily schemes of a contemptuous empress. The *Letter to Cosmas* narrates the fateful altercation between Pulcheria and Nestorius in the decisive events leading up to the Council of Ephesus.¹⁴³ So self-assured was the empress with her elevated status as a bride of Christ that she, along with her group of ascetic women, deigned to take Sunday communion with the clergymen, her brother Theodosius II, and the newly ordained Nestorius within the sanctuary of the Great Church as she had always been allowed. Nestorius, having just arrived in Constantinople but still somehow privy to her vivacious adultery, barred Pulcheria’s entry. Pulcheria, baffled by Nestorius’ behavior, asked why she and her ascetic women were being turned away. “Have I not given birth to God?” she allegedly asked. Nestorius replied: “You? You have given birth to Satan!”¹⁴⁴

Later Nestorians exaggerated the story further. After she was refused entrance to the sanctuary, they wrote:

[Pulcheria] left in a rage, and went and reported the incident to the Emperor. 'On your life, my sister,' he replied, 'and by the crown that is on your head, I will not rest till I have taken vengeance on him.' From that day forth Nestorius enjoyed no credit with the Emperor.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* 1.3.146-9.

¹⁴³ This episode and any personal animosity between Pulcheria and Nestorius is not mentioned by Socrates, Sozomen, or any other contemporary.

¹⁴⁴ *Letter to Cosmas* 8, trans. Holum (1982).

¹⁴⁵ *Letter to Cosmas* 8; The suggestion that Theodosius turned on Nestorius is not supported by ancient sources, in fact, he relentlessly defended Nestorius until the very end. The letter from Nestorius to Theodosius pleading for help against Cyril: *Letter 49: Report of Nestorius to Theodosius II* 1-2; Theodosius’ scathing letter to Cyril, *Letter of Theodosius II to Cyril of Alexandria*; Even Nestorius, in his tell-all book mentions how he and Theodosius kept

By rewriting the narrative so that Nestorius was the hapless victim in a vindictive campaign by a cruel empress, he and his supporters place the blame for his downfall on Pulcheria. Like her mother Eudoxia, Pulcheria's meticulous public image and her lifetime dedication to ascetic virginity was at the mercy of a few well-placed misogynistic stereotypes.

Following the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the sixth century anti-Chalcedonian text *Life of Dioscorus* intertwined Pulcheria's imitation of Mary's virginity with the Christian concept of corruptible feminine nature. Pulcheria was the Devil's beguiled agent, the second Eve, in the second Fall of humankind into a new fraudulent state-sponsored orthodoxy. "For if Eve had hidden her eyes and not looked at the tree of good and evil, death would not have entered into the world. And if Pulcheria had hidden her eyes and not looked at Marcian, the canons and doctrines of the true faith would not be disrupted."¹⁴⁶ Pulcheria's image as a pious virgin was turned on itself as a symbol to the fate of the larger empire. Pulcheria was a virtuous virgin like Mary, then she became a sinful Eve; the Empire was in a golden age of orthodoxy, then it descended into evil heresy.

In the beginning, it was Eve, the church leaders decided, who caused the Fall that brought humankind into the depths of human sin and imperfection. In the fifth century, the Theodosian empresses were still falling. Their society had lurched into a cultural and religious metamorphosis and the empresses worked alongside emperors and church leaders to sculpt new meaning into the mosaic of Roman life. With womanhood newly defined on the binaries of sinful Eve and sanctified Mary, the empresses imitated the most ideal aspects of Christian femininity: Eudoxia the mother,

good relations Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* 1.3.146; John Rufus *Plerophoriae* 35 reports that Theodosius was attacked by the public for continuing to support Nestorius through the upheaval in the city; Evagrius, 1.7, writes that years before Nestorius revised his story, he claimed that "Theodosius, from feelings of friendship, withheld his ratification of the sentence of deposition."; for more see T. Graumann, "Theodosius II and the Politics of the First Council of Ephesus" in *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (2013): 109-129.

¹⁴⁶ *Hist.* 4 from E. Watts "Theodosius II and Anti-Chalcedonian Communal Memory" (2013): pp. 275.

Eudocia the wife, and Pulcheria the virgin. Each drew more authority and acclaim from their status than the next. The empresses stripped back the social construct and Christian virtues of their gender to exert a power that transcended the physical bounds of their imperial palace and reached through the pages of Scripture all the way into the ethereal Heavens. The empresses, at various points in their careers, were each successful in crafting public reputations of feminine Christian imperial virtue. Even then, with little force, the empresses were toppled one by one from the heights of their teetering female imperial power.

The precarious nature of feminine authority and the new Christian womanhood can best be defined through the words of Empress Eudocia. The three empresses left behind no personal belongings, no letters or journals in the historical record that could bring a voice to their lived experiences. However, during one of her pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Eudocia wrote a Homeric Cento—Biblical narratives painstakingly pieced together entirely from Homeric verse—that detailed the Fall of Eve:

You know how a woman is changeable in spirit in the depths of her soul.
With her own heart, she would not have conceived a wile deed,
Terrible, she who plunged us all into a great calamity at once:

...Terrible in the songs of the descendants; she is forever put to shame
His sex, by their behavior blameless,
In our times and the time to come to all generations
There is nothing more disgusting, there is nothing more hateful,
[Than] a brazenly shameless woman, scheming cunningly like this.¹⁴⁷

In one passage Eudocia elucidates the transmission of Classical culture into the burgeoning Christian ethos by pulling verses on Helen from the *Iliad* and restructuring them into the familiar story of Eve. Through time, from Eve to Helen to Eudocia to Pulcheria, ancient writers recycled

¹⁴⁷ Eudocia, *1st Homeric Centos Redaction* lines 68-80, translated from Aleksandrova, Tatiana. "The Homeric Cento of Empress Eudocia." (2017): 188. For an in-depth analysis of Eudocia and her Homeric Centos see, Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia*. 1998.

the story of a shameless woman, a fateful apple, and the resulting woes of men.¹⁴⁸ Immortalized in Ancient Greek mythology, Biblical Scripture, and experienced by the Theodosian empresses, men needed someone to blame, and women were, by their feminine nature, guilty. The Theodosian empresses were the strong architects of their Christian imperial womanhood, but after their deaths their images were deconstructed, and their characters reframed into archetype villainesses by ancient authors with a grudge.

¹⁴⁸ The Apple of Discord, a popular symbol in mythology, launched Helen into the arms of the Trojan prince Paris and then subsequently a thousand Greek ships towards Troy for a war that would span twenty years and two Homeric Epics, The Iliad and The Odyssey.

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