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Neoplatonic and Gnostic Resonances in the *Martyrdom of Cyprian of Athenais Eudocia*

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Abstract:

Aelia Eudocia Augusta (formerly Athenais), wife of the emperor Theodosius II, lives at the borderline between the ancient and the Christian world and writes one of the most distinctive poetic texts of Byzantine literature. In the *Martyrdom of Cyprian*, written in Homeric language, the Saint's past, when he was a magician and initiated into a multitude of Greek mysteries, is presented in an original and remarkable way. Within this text, the resonance of philosophical ideas originating from Neoplatonism and Gnosticism is of particular interest. This article attempts to highlight these resonances in order to open a research dialogue regarding the complex network of ideas and the coexistence of different worldviews in early Byzantium.

Keywords: Aelia Eudocia Augusta, Cyprian, Martyrdom of Cyprian, Byzantine literature, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism

1. Introduction

Eudocia (401-460) can be considered the first poetess of the Byzantine world at the dawn of the Middle Ages. She was an Athenian raised as a pagan by a father who directed a school of rhetoric, but she ended up becoming empress at the side of Theodosius II when she converted to Christianity, as her position required. She was an educated woman whose work had almost been forgotten and only in the last three centuries came to light through a few dedicated scholars.

Contemporary sources about Eudocia's life are scarce. On the contrary, later sources give a multitude of biographical details, often based on fiction and folk legends, and in some cases, they can hardly be considered reliable¹. Eudocia was born around 401 in Athens to a wealthy family named Athenais. Her father, Leontios, being a famous orator, provided her with a rich education based on classical texts and instilled in her a passion for Greek culture, which she maintained throughout her life. At a very young age, after her father's death, Athenais went to the imperial court to assert her rights to the paternal estate against her brothers. It is said that she was met there by Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius II, who was immediately fascinated by her gifts: her intelligence, her education and her beauty. There the threads of history and myth begin to further intertwine. Pulcheria considered Eudocia to be a suitable bride for her brother; thus, Athenais, after being baptized a Christian, married Theodosius in 421. She bore three children, of whom only one, Eudoxia, reached adulthood.

Eudocia was a dynamic empress who played an active role in the affairs of the empire. We should not fail to mention the central role she played in the organization of Pandidactirion (425), an institution that is characterized as the first university

¹ From the Byzantine chroniclers Malalas (c. 491-578), Socrates Scholasticus (380-440) and Evagrius (536-594) we get important information, as well as from the *Paschal Chronicle* (a chronicle of an unknown author that records the events beginning from the creation of the world until AD 630).

of the Byzantine state. Her dynamism in the exercise of authority did not take long to bring her into conflict with Pulcheria, while for reasons that to this day remain rather unclear, she fell into general disfavor and became the victim of various accusations: for example, it was rumored that she entered into a relationship with the highest official of the state Paulinus (magister officiorum), a fact that some chroniclers claimed ultimately led to her "fall".

When her daughter Eudoxia married the Western Emperor Valentinian III in 437, she made a long journey from Constantinople to Jerusalem, returning to the capital in 439. During her journey, she passed through her beloved Antioch and there she declared her real belief, that she belongs to that world that Antioch continues to represent as a center of Greek education and pagan philosophy: "Ἰμετέρας γενεῆς τε καὶ αἵματος εὐχομαι εἶναι". In a few words, she said that she belonged to a world that was slowly fading away under the violent attacks of the single truth of Christianity. Eudocia's second trip to Jerusalem in 443 marked her definitive leave from the palace. Eudocia remained there until her death. The real reasons for this strange "exile" are historically unconfirmed.

Eudocia until the end of her life was a free spirit. She sought a policy to mitigate the aggressive attitude of the state towards the pagans, to the point where she was characterized by historians as *longa manus* of the pagans in the palace (could this be the reason for her "exile"?)². She had the same attitude towards Jews. In addition, Eudocia became involved in the disputes between the different positions on the nature of Christ by siding with the Nestorians³, while Pulcheria aligned herself with Cyril of Alexandria⁴, whose positions finally prevailed at the Council of Ephesus in 431 with the condemnation of Nestorius. Afterwards, Eudocia aligns herself with the Monophysites, in opposition to Pulcheria, again on the side of the "losers", since the Council of Chalcedon condemned

² Bevegni C., 2006: 16 ff.

³ Gierlach-Walker L. L., 2017: 84-103.

⁴ This is the well-known bishop of Alexandria, under whose tolerance or instigation the massacre of Hypatia was carried out.

Monophysitism in 451. It was not until 455 that Eudocia seemed to give in to the doctrine consolidated by the two Synods concerning the dual nature of Christ. We should not find it strange that the poetess took the position that supports the one nature of Christ (either the human or the divine), since the Greek education and the philosophical roots of Athenais are in accordance with the existence of a man who becomes a god - this also is found in the mysteries with the "deification" of the great initiates - or the descent of a divine entity to earth, as noted in the Homeric epics and ancient mythology.

Athenais-Eudocia is a gifted poetess, whom Photius praises in his *Bibliotheca*⁵. She uses the Homeric dialect and the dactylic hexameter. Eudocia is not the only one who, in late antiquity, wrote in Homeric verse and dialect; among others, the case of Nonnus is typical. He wrote the *Paraphrase of John* in dactylic hexameter, while he also wrote the *Dionysiaca* in a complicated dialect, which has been described as more difficult than the language of Homer. These demanding choices of several scholars function as a sign of intellectual continuation or as a credential for superior knowledge and refined talent. The most important works of Eudocia that have reached us are the *Martyrdom of Cyprian* and the *Homerocentones* (episodes from the life of Christ in a "Homeric style").

Cyprian of Antioch is a figure between history and legend. We know him mainly as a Saint whose prayers are recited in exorcisms, while stories have been woven around his name that touches on a recurring pattern found in the lives of Saints: he is a man devoted to magical practices, who, however, realising the weakness of his methods, eventually converted to Christianity, becoming a bishop and then a martyr for his new faith.

In her poem, Eudocia, following some elements that are also found in the hagiographies of Cyprian⁶, portrays his life with new expressive power and original imagery, emphasising his knowledge during his apprenticeship as a magician. Cyprian

⁵ Photius, among his various works he mentions, refers only two female writers, Eudocia and the historian Pamphile in the 1st century AD.

⁶ See the texts of the first christian centuries: *Confessio Cypriani*, *Conversio Cypriani*, *Passio Cypriani*. See also Bailey R., 2009.

of Eudocia is a magician who runs through every center of wisdom and pagan mystery, a passionate observer of nature, an interlocutor of demons, and a Faustian archetype at a very early time. It is noteworthy that in Book II, where Cyprian looks back on his life, there are constant references to his passion for knowledge: *I learned, I met*, he repeats as he unravels the thread of his life, while in verse 10 of the same book, we are impressed by the purity of his confession: *no one wanted to know as much as I, nor had so much passion*. Eudocia seems to be interested in saving the unknown cults through which the magician passes, perhaps because she knows that this world of ancient mysteries, divination and magical practices, of many and rare gods is slowly fading away under the religious repression. Justa, who as a Christian is renamed Justine (also recorded as Justina), becomes the motivation that leads the magician to question the power of demons and to search for a new, more effective power: it is striking that Cyprian's conversion is not presented as the result of a moral change, but as a realisation that the cross can give greater power than demonic elements. Justine does not give in to Aglaidas and to the seduction tricks that Cyprian uses. Thus, Cyprian begins to believe that Christ can offer better and stronger "spells".

The variety of demons and monstrous beings described in a special, bold poetic imagination is also impressive, as is the variety of their horrible actions, which brings to mind Dante's *Hell*, the dark world of Gothic literature, but also the long tradition of hierarchies of demons that have been cultivated in many peoples (we can refer indicatively to the imaginative demonologies of the Mesopotamians and the Persians), so that a comparative study of these sources with the work of Eudocia would be interesting.

It is worth pointing out that Cyprian and Justine turn into a unique couple according to the traditions, which brings to mind the apocryphal *Acts*, where the couple of Paul and Thecla are the protagonists⁷. A very interesting element is the

⁷ After all, Eudocia mentions Thecla in v. 113 of Book I, likening her to Justine.

erotic context that Eudocia uses, both when she describes Justine's struggle to resist sexual desires provoked to her by magical practices, and when Cyprian himself is shown to be shaken by a desire similar to that of Aglaidas. The existence of the original erotic phraseology that conveys Justine's struggle to resist her sexual instincts but also illustrates her devotion to Christ cannot help but bring to mind the texts of the later medieval female mystics of the West, such as Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena⁸. Thus, Eudocia emerges as a pioneering, subversive poetic voice that can also be read from the perspective of gender studies in the history of literature. As an example, we will mention verbal motifs that are scattered throughout the poem and concern the recording of this extraordinary eroticism: Justine experiences a burning desire for Christ, she is consumed by her passion for him, she marries him, she does a full-body sign of the cross, filling herself with what she desires, she puts the torch of desire for Christ inside her, she calls on Christ to penetrate her body, while sometimes under the influence of magic, she feels a burning sickness inside her (the awakening of eroticism) , which she struggles to resist by remaining the bride of Christ.

Unfortunately, Eudocia's *Martyrdom of Cyprian* has not survived in its entirety. It included the entire course of Cyprian's life in three books, but today only 900 verses of the whole work are available: the first book (421 verses) and the first 479 verses of the second book. We owe the surviving text to a single manuscript and a great publishing adventure. Around 1760, Angelo Maria Bandini, Regius Praefectus of the Laurentian Library, accidentally discovered in the manuscript Laurenziano Greco VII, 10 (11th century) the work of Eudocia, which by mistake had been placed inside the paraphrase of the Gospel of St. John by Nonnus of Panopolis. Thus, verses 100-421 of the first book and verses 1-479 of the second book come to light. Bandini published these verses twice (in 1761 and 1764) together with a Latin translation, but without a critical note⁹. The 1761 edition was followed by Migne in 1860

⁸ On the erotic context in texts of the medieval female mystics you can see also: Petroff E. A., 1994. Bell, R. M., 2002. Dufrasne D., 2009.

⁹ Bandini A. M., 1761 και Bandini A. M., 1764.

in *Patrologia Graeca*. In 1897, Arthur Ludwig made another edition, applying a scientific method for the first time¹⁰.

One century later, the first part of the text (verses 1-99 of the first book) came to light through a new edition by the main contemporary researcher of Eudocia's work, Claudio Bevegni. He discovered the 99 lost verses in a manuscript now kept in the Leiden Library (Leidensis BPG 95) and published them for the first time in 1982. The verses had been lost due to the Dutch philologist Philippus Rulaeus, who, after his visit to Florence in 1674, had torn this particular part of the text from the codex to which it belonged and had transferred it with other codices and manuscripts to the Netherlands. Bevegni translated the surviving text in 2006¹¹.

In 1982 Enrica Salvaneschi translated the poem according to Ludwig's edition¹², while in 1979 a German translation of the first book by Helene Homeyer preceded it. A very recent bibliography should refer to the edition done by Brian Sowers (Center for Hellenic Studies)¹³. These were some of the main publishing and translation milestones of the *Martyrdom of Cyprian* over the centuries¹⁴. We, after seven years of intensive study and translation work, have completed the first translation of this masterpiece into modern Greek. This linguistically impervious poem echoes not only an era but also the spirit of a poet who deserves to be known to a wider audience¹⁵.

¹⁰ Ludwig A., 1897.

¹¹ Bevegni C., 2006.

¹² Bevegni C., 1982: 249-262.

¹³ Sowers B. P., 2020.

¹⁴ For an analytical bibliography about Eudocia and her work, see: <https://sites.google.com/site/hellenisticbibliography/empire/eudocia>

¹⁵ The translation of *Martyrdom of Cyprian* into modern Greek and analytical commentary will be soon published.

2. Philosophical influences on the *Martyrdom of Cyprian*: The Worlds of Demons and the Nature of Evil in the Neoplatonists and Gnostics

In the work of Eudocia *Martyrdom of Cyprian*, the dualist Christian perception is presented. This perception concerns the constant conflict between the forces of good, that is, God, Christ, and the angels, and the forces of evil, that is, various classes of demons and monsters, who oppose the work of God. In other words, the ontological forces of the Universe are not integrated into a single plan, as was presented until then in Greek ontologies, where the origin is clearly one and everything emanates from it, even the entities that seem to serve opposing purposes. In the Christian understanding, there is an absolute rupture between good and evil, definitively separating the order of angels from the order of demons.

To understand how this transition from the unified Greek World to the radically divided Christian Universe was made, we will briefly describe the Neoplatonic and Gnostic concepts during the first Christian centuries. As we shall see, although Neoplatonism studies the problem of evil and proposes solutions for the salvation of man, it maintains the unity of being. On the other hand, Gnosticism, an inheritor of the dualistic concepts of the East, speaks of two worlds radically separated. In this view, some people, predestined for eternity, can escape from the suffocating darkness of this world and taste the true light.

2.1. Neoplatonic Influences on the *Martyrdom of Cyprian*

In the context of the Neoplatonic school, pure philosophy was cultivated along with theurgy, namely the magical invocations of gods, angels, and demons aimed at achieving specific goals. Such a context is not too far from the early life of Cyprian, who invoked various types of demons.

We will focus on two important representative Neoplatonists, who have been particularly concerned with the

problem of evil and the ontological hierarchies of angels and demons, Iamblichus (245-325 AD) and Proclus (412-485 AD). The second clearly builds on and expands the work of the first. It is reasonable to assume that Eudocia, a scholar of that period, had access to (and knowledge about) the texts of Iamblichus and possibly towards the end of her life, also of Proclus, who assumed leadership of the Platonic School in 437, after the death of Syrianus.

In the work *On the Egyptian Mysteries*¹⁶ Iamblichus provides us valuable information about gods, archangels, angels, demons, heroes, lords and souls. Proclus also gives a very detailed account of the nature and function of angels and demons, in *Platonic Theology*¹⁷, clearly influenced by the ideas of Iamblichus, as conveyed to him through Plutarch of Athens and Syrianus.

The Christian dualistic conception brought about an absolute rupture between good and evil, definitively separating the order of angels from the order of demons. But Proclus studies in a moderate and rational way the question of the existence of evil in his treatise *On the existence of evil*. Investigating whether evil has access to the ontological classes of angels, demons, and heroes, Proclus makes some important remarks about the nature of these beings, which are far from the corresponding Christian concepts of the time. Angels are the messengers of the gods who reveal their will as they communicate with their minds. Their nature is benevolent, as they are radiations of the divine good; they possess a pure good and do not accept evil. Demons arose from the power and fertility of the gods and they constitute an order which follows the order of angels. They occupy the middle position in the order of dynamic entities, while the heroes occupy the third position. In addition to demons, in essence, there are also the perfected human souls, which have ended up demons. Proclus wonders whether demons have anything to do with evil. Some speak of wicked and evil demons who lead souls to the place of punishment under the earth, those souls that come from, and are destined to reach heaven. But

¹⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian Mysteries*, 2.7-2.10.

¹⁷ Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, 7.1-7.2.

are they evil, or are they like teachers and pedagogues, who some people call wicked, while they simply take it upon themselves to correct mistakes and not allow students who make mistakes to get a higher position than they deserve? Proclus goes on to say that we similarly consider evil those who stand in front of the shrines and keep out the impure, forbidding them from participating in the sacraments held within. If, therefore, some of the demons that exist in the World lead souls upward, and others guard souls that cannot yet ascend, it is not right to consider either of them evil. For there must also exist those who keep by force in the earthly realm whoever is impure and unworthy yet to ascend to heaven. Based on this, it is not correct to consider demons as evil, since they act according to their nature, which is in no way evil.

Finally, Proclus in his commentaries on *Alcibiades* refers to the many and various types of demons in Diotima's speech in *Symposion*. Each god, he asserts, presides over a class of demons and then over the individual souls. Some souls have been scattered to the sun, some to the moon, and some to the other planets (gods). An order of demons is tasked with bringing souls into contact with their familiar rulers. A second class of demons supervise the upward and downward courses of souls.

Using the same Neoplatonic terminology, an almost contemporary of Eudocia, Synesius (d. 415), the most famous student of the philosopher Hypatia, develops his hymns. Synesius adored his teacher, as is evident from his letters to her, but also his partners in her school. He calls her teacher of the *orgies of philosophy* and constantly alludes to the high quality of the lessons he received, which, however, was not allowed to be openly disclosed. Hypatia, a high-level mathematician and astronomer, also taught philosophy both publicly and privately. The core of her philosophical structure seems to have been Neoplatonic, probably following the system of Plutarch of Athens, which contained, in addition to the theoretical part, a theurgical-ritual part. The only way to get a taste of Hypatia's system is to study the hymns of Synesius. Indeed, in his hymns, we recognize a lot of the above-

mentioned elements of Iamblichus's ontology which pass through Plutarch and Syrianus to Proclus¹⁸. So Synesius describes angels, demons and heroes, following the model of Iamblichus. For example in Hymn III he mentions, in addition to angels and heroes, the demons of matter and beasts, such as the winged serpent and soul-eating dogs (κύνες or σκύλακες)¹⁹.

2.2. Gnostic Influences on the *Martyrdom of Cyprian*

Dualist thought has its roots in Iranian Zoroastrianism; it shaped decisively the currents of Manichaeism, Mazdaism, and mainly Gnosticism. In all these currents, evil has acquired an ontological existence; it is presented as a powerful opponent of the god who has now assumed the role of the defender of good. In primitive Zoroastrianism, the dominant figure was Ahura Mazda, the lord of wisdom, the supreme god, and the references to good and evil are still abstract, such as good intention (Vohu Manah) and evil intention (Aka Manah). From Ahura Mazda seven heavenly powers, the so-called Amesha Spenta, are born. Ahriman or Angra Mainyu is the destructive spirit as opposed to the creative spirit (Spenta Mainyu). Early Zoroastrianism (as reflected in the Avesta texts) was a monistic system, with no direct confrontation between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. Later, in the texts of the Middle Persian Period, a new system of two poles of good and evil as primary forces appears.

Manichaeism is the par excellence dualistic system of the time, where there are two incompatible worlds: the world of spirit, good, and light, and the world of matter, evil, and darkness. The world of light originated and is ruled by the Great Living God (Hayyi Rabbi), Lord of Light, Lord of Greatness, Great Mind, or First Life (Haiyi Qadmaiyyi). The world of light has originated and is ruled by the Great Living God (Hayyi Rabbi) or Lord of Light or Lord of Greatness or

¹⁸ See extensive description and analysis of Synesius' hymns and the Platonic elements that permeate them at: Δενδρινός Μ., 2021.

¹⁹ Δενδρινός Μ., 2021: 74-80.

Great Mind or First Life (Haiyi Qadmai). After successive emanations, the Fourth Life (Ptahil) appears, which is also the creator of the material world. Apart from these emanations, Ptahil is surrounded by a multitude of angels or guardians, with Manda d-Hayyi dominant among them, who is his envoy on Earth. The world of darkness is ruled by the Lord of Darkness and emerges from the dark waters of chaos. The struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, leads to the creation of the world of matter by the creator Ptahil and the assistance of the evil female spirit Ruha, the seven planets and the twelve constellations. The first man, Adam was also made by them but his soul essence was taken from the World of Light. This essence of light within Adam constitutes the immortal soul or mind of man, which must be saved from the darkness and evil of matter through the power of light.

In the same context, Jews dream of a kingdom to which God the Father Creator Jehovah leads them to be elected people. This is accomplished by his prophets, who envisage the coming of Messiah in the later days. This vision is moved by the hope and the goal of an ideal earthly society. God is interested in man; he interacts with people; and he talks and fights with them, as shown by Jacob's fight with the angel. There is no evil creator that people must overcome to reach the true God. In addition, there is no evil as an adversary to Jehovah; on the contrary, Sathaniel sits at the table of God's angelic advisors, as is described in the case of Job.

In the last pre-Christian years, however, the need for the redemption of the Jewish people was imperatively expressed in various Jewish sects, as recorded in detail in various apocryphal texts of apocalyptic eschatology, such as the *Book of Enoch*, the *Book of Daniel*, and various Revelations, leading to the dominant later text, the *Apocalypse* of John. In resonance with them, we might include the prophetic words of Jesus about the coming end, as described in the last chapters of the Gospels just before the divine drama. In these texts, the battle between the forces of good and evil is described with great intensity, a battle that the biblical Jesus clearly supported, a fact that places him more in late Jewish dualistic eschatology than in the official Mosaic monistic Jewish tradition, where evil

is included in the divine order. Both Gnostic and Christian dogma eventually prevailed, based on the strongly dualistic worldview and sayings of Jesus.

The main features of Gnosticism are [1] that the divine unfolds into a hierarchy of entities, called *lords* or *aeons*, and [2] that the distinction between a supreme god who is the real god, the god of light and good, and a lower god who is the creator of the material world and who, either by intention to differentiate himself from the higher principle or by mistake, brought evil, imperfection, pain, and death in the world. This is the theory of cosmic error through which they explain the existence of evil in a more reasonable way since it was difficult to reconcile it with the idea of an all-powerful and all-good god.

The polemics of the fathers of the early Church and especially Irenaeus of Lyons (around 180), Hippolytus of Rome (around 230) and Epiphanius of Cyprus (around 375) against the Gnostics prove the power and spread of their ideas as well as the dissemination of the texts of great Gnostics of the time, such as Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion. As we saw, the key feature of gnostic ontology is the complex hierarchies of beings, the *aeons*, some of which either carelessly or intentionally attempt to make their own creation, without the consent of the higher god. This act automatically transforms these entities and their hierarchies from an angelic to a demonic state, taking on the responsibility of creating the material world. Thus, this world bears a seal of evil and darkness, similar to its creator. Some people have within them the spark of the supreme god and can, through knowledge, attain salvation, escaping the deadly effects of this world. These hierarchies are similar to the demonic orders presented in the Gospels, but also in the lives of Saints, as in the *Martyrdom of Cyprian*, where Eudocia presents a series of such creatures with great intensity and inventiveness.

However, it was not only the Gnostics who were dangerous for the orthodoxy of Christianity, which was determined in detail by various Ecumenical Synods. Another important issue was the human or divine nature of Jesus Christ. As we have already seen, Gnosticism tended towards docetism, supporting

that the bodily presence of Jesus Christ was only apparent, since he was an eternal being appearing in a human body, which did not actually experience human emotions, such as pain and abandonment. In contrast, Nestorius argued that Christ was a normal man who managed to become deified by his own powers, a position that reappears in the theological literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, where there is an attempt to strip the life of Jesus of its miraculous elements, a tendency compatible with the deistic worldview of the Enlightenment²⁰. In this context, Nestorius refused the term *Theotokos* and introduced the term Christotokos for Mary, the mother of Jesus. This position was condemned at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. Next, the divine nature of Jesus Christ began to be emphasized more, leading Eutyches to speak of a nature, the divine nature, which absorbed the human one. In addition, this monophysite position was condemned at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Church was struggling to balance both natures in one and the same person, something extremely difficult to understand for common sense, leading populous churches, such as the Coptic and the Armenian, to be cut off from Orthodoxy. It should also be noted that the core of the great so-called heresies of Christendom, including Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism, is philosophically more reasonable than the eventually dominant Christian thesis. In this frame, the philosophical approach of Eudocia towards the Nestorian doctrine of human nature or towards the Monophysite doctrine of the divine nature could be explained due to her pagan philosophical education in Athens.

²⁰ Already at the end of the 17th century John Toland with his work *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) and Ernest Renan in the 19th century highlight a Jesus free from the miraculous dimension. This tendency is also noticeable in the liberal deists of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Thomas Jefferson, President of USA, who wrote a personal Bible, without any reference to miraculous acts.

3. Conclusions

Eudocia is a person on the border between the ancient and Christian worlds, a philosopher's daughter who became the leader of the Christian empire. She was the object of admiration for the Gentiles of Antioch, whom she called "her own breed". At the same time, she witnessed the entire fabric of the ancient world, which formed the civilization of her youth, collapsing. She tried almost in vain to save it as much as possible, through the establishment of a university that recruited Greek teachers. Had she really embraced the ideology of Christianity? Her conversion to Christianity is not unreasonable; during this period, some scholars, such as Numenius in the past and Nemesius in her time, dared to formulate interesting comparative systems. Our opinion is that she maintained a critical attitude towards things that probably seemed absurd to her, such as the fusion of human and divine nature, which she accepted very late, a few years before her death. We cannot be sure that this change in her attitude reflects a deep personal need, and that it was not simply done for reasons of diplomacy regarding the ideological conflicts that were still raging in the eastern territories of the empire at that time. Similarly, a few years ago, Synesius proclaimed the bishop of Cyrene, without accepting the basic doctrines of Christianity, such as the birth of the soul together with the body or the bodily resurrection of the dead, as he confides in a letter to his brother Euoptius. What is certain is that she was intensely attracted to ancient Greek literature, as can be deduced from the language of the *Martyrdom of Cyprian*, which was written in Homeric Greek with many lexicalizations, making it one of the most difficult texts ever written in ancient times.

There is no evidence regarding the acceptance she had from the Christian scholars, either as a personality or concerning this specific work. Also, not to be overlooked is her peculiar removal from the capital, which is a reasonable indication that she was largely unwanted for political or ideological reasons. The difficulty of the text certainly discouraged many from studying it and disseminating it as a model of recording and writing the lives of Saints. Remarkably, only one copy survived,

and in this copy, both the beginning and the end were missing until the former was fortunately restored by Claudio Bevegni. Why was it not copied in sufficient numbers? Was this a deliberate choice and if so what made the prospective copiers so wary? We must focus on the atmosphere that the text radiates. It does not look like a virtuous text aimed at conversion. Rather, it is a text that shows the phases of the life of a man who has travelled through and been initiated into all the then-surviving mysteries of the ancient world and became a knowledgeable and skilled operator of occult powers through the invocations of various entities, such as those we can see that dominate in the Neoplatonic and Gnostic systems of her time. Above all, it is a text that does not focus much on the moral superiority of Christianity over previous religions, but on the possibility that one can acquire greater powers through the sign of the Cross, thus becoming more effective in magician duels that aim to achieve specific results. What was Cyprian for Eudocia? A magician who ended up becoming a Christian because he found there the highest and most effective techniques possible for manipulating occult forces. Such a figure of a Saint was not the best possible example of a religion that wanted to move away from the occult searches of magic and towards a new ideal based simply on moral life, the strict application of ascetic rules in the everyday life of man and the endless waiting for the divine grace far from all human initiatives and techniques.

Therefore, Cyprian is the model of the magician, even the good magician who has placed himself at the service of God for the benefit of the people, and manifests a kind of primary empiricism, whereby invoking specific forces he brings about corresponding results. Indeed, as described in verses I.329-335, Cyprian accepts only that power, which is effective at the critical moment of a confrontation, the power of Christ, which Justine invokes and uses, overcoming the forces of demons. Thus, it is not a question of blind faith in something but the empirical confirmation of an opinion about the effectiveness of a magical invocation. This magical empiricism reappears centuries later during the Renaissance, where magic is considered by Agrippa von Nettesheim and Jan Baptist van

Helmont as one of the sciences to be studied. Weapon salve, namely applying ointment on the weapon that caused a wound to heal the wounded person, is acceptable as long as its repeated successful application makes it a scientific practice based on repeated experiments. Thus, Cyprian emerges through the work of Eudocia as the perfect model of the human experimenter who dares to face the divine and demonic forces even at the risk of his own life. It is a Faust before Faust that the descriptions of the deformed and strange demons perhaps surpass the originality of the landmark work of the great German thinker.



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