

Maria Supplicanda: the Mediatrix and Rome's Female Social Network

During the Late Antique period, the Virgin Mary, at first considered nothing but a vessel through which the Judeo-Christian God engendered himself, took on a new role within the developing Christian faith. She becomes the Mediatrix; the recipient of the prayers of the faithful, in particular of women, in the expressed hope that she would intervene with her son, Jesus, on their behalf. When Justin II was crowned Emperor, his wife, the Empress Sophia, addressed a prayer Mary at the Mother of God that she favor Justin II's reign (Corippus *In laud. Iust.* 2.62-65). The power to intercede with God on behalf petitioners was inspired by the Roman custom of applying to the powerful women in the empirical family rather than applying directly to the Emperor.

The connection between Mary's role as divine protectress and the mother goddess cult of the earlier Greco-Roman religion is well documented (Carroll 1986 90-112, Borgeaud 2004 120-131), but Mary's role as interceder has roots in the female social networks of the earlier Roman period. It was a long established practice in Rome to address supplications to the female relatives of powerful men, first Republican Magistrates, then members of the Imperial households in the hope that these women would plead with their men-folk on the suppliant's behalf. As far back as the matron Volumnia's successful supplication of her son Coriolanius on behalf of the women of Rome (Livy, *Ab urbe condita.* 2.40, Plut. *Vit. Cor.* 33- 36), Romans, particularly Roman women, turned to the wives and particularly the mothers of powerful men in the hope that they could succeed where others fell short.

This custom became even more entrenched during the Principate, particularly during the reign of Tiberius when his mother Livia successfully interceded for accused murderess Munatia Plancina (Tacitus, 3.17). Imperial mothers continued to intercede with their son's behalf of

suppliants throughout the Imperial period. Julia Domna received petitions (Dio 79.4.2-3) and Helena visited the Holy Land in part as an imperial emissary for her son Constantine (Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 3.42.1).

As catholic Christianity was being established, the Romans borrowed many of the established mode of interaction with Imperial women to think about Mary as the mother of God. She is address with Imperial titles and venerated by *Augustae* (Rubin 2009 43-49, 63-76). As such her position as Queen Mother makes her an ideal interceder in the older custom of Imperial dowagers. Mary's conceptual antecedents are drawn from many disparate sources, but her role as Mediatrix is adapted from Rome's powerful imperial women.

Bibliography

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