

Triumphal Imagery in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

Sections 4.1 and 4.3 of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* contain an intricate allusion to the triumphal procession. After a certain Alexander accosts Thecla in the streets of Antioch, she rejects his advances and sets him up “as a triumph” (ἔστησεν αὐτὸν θρίαμβον, 4.1). Egan argues that the phrase has the sense of “display” and makes no reference to the Roman celebration (1977). More recently, Barrier (2009) has suggested that θρίαμβον must have some connection to a triumphal procession, though he declines to pursue this idea further. Both overlook the scene’s other details that support such an association. Alexander is portrayed as a successful military leader, the first of the Antiochenes (Ἀντιοχέων πρῶτος) who wears the general’s cloak (γλαμύδα) and a crown (στέφανον). On the other hand, Thecla, who claims to be the first of Iconians (Ἰκονιέων...πρώτη), has been forcibly removed from her city (ἐκβέβλημαι) and now refers to herself as a foreigner (ξένην) and a slave (δούλην). The dichotomy of Thecla’s status and the martial undertones of the scene suggest that the passage presents Thecla as a war captive. The phrase ἔστησεν αὐτὸν θρίαμβον, then, is a reversal of roles: the general Alexander becomes the conquered and the captive Thecla, taking Alexander’s crown (περιεῖλεν αὐτοῦ τὸν στέφανον), becomes the *triumphator*. The scene represents a literary inversion of a common numismatic theme, in which a laurate emperor appears on a coin’s obverse while a submissive and dejected female sits on its reverse. The passage, then, is a rejection of and a triumph over Roman civil and military power.

After her condemnation *ad bestias*, Thecla participates in a procession (ἐπόμευεν, 4.3) that alludes to the triumph of the god Dionysus. According to Roman tradition, Dionysus invented the triumph when he returned to Greece from conquering India – hence the god’s epithet θρίαμβος. During this inaugural triumph, Dionysus rode upon either tigers or lions (Suda,

s.v. Θρίαμβος), and depictions of the god riding on felines are widespread in the Mediterranean world (e.g. Otto 1965). The fact that Thecla conspicuously sits on top of a lioness (ἡ δὲ λέαινα ἐπάνω καθεζομένης) during her own procession deliberately recalls this well-known image. There is evidence that the early church may have drawn upon Dionysiac myth to promote its theology because the pagan god and Jesus had similar stories of death and resurrection (e.g. Bowersock, 1994, Moles 2006, Friesen 2013). While these allusions may have attracted pagans sympathetic to Dionysiac rites, their ultimate aim was to show that Jesus and his followers supplant their pagan counterparts. Thecla's triumphant ride upon an animal sacred to Dionysus, then, shows the victory of the Jesus over the Greco-Roman god.

These references to the Roman and Dionysian triumph converge in the character Alexander, whose name recalls Alexander the Great. Alexander was the successful military leader *par excellence* of the ancient world and, at least in the Hellenistic period and later, had a strong connection to the god Dionysus (e.g. Rice 1983). Thecla's Alexander blends these two prominent characteristics of the real life Alexander the Great, and is an embodiment of both imperial authority and pagan religious tradition. Thus, Thecla's riding on a lion in triumph over Alexander represents Christianity's victory over the entire Greco-Roman world.

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