

Ave Maris Stella: The Maritime Cultus of the Madonna in Late Antiquity

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It has become commonplace for scholars to imagine, in the iconography of the Christian Madonna, a vector for the survival of earlier cultic practises. Miroslav Marcovich famously wrote of “the mighty Sumerian-Accadian goddess of love and fertility, of heaven, sea, and war” who, transported “from Mesopotamia to Greece... changed her name to Aphrodite” before transferring “her functions to the Virgin Mary as a Regina caeli, Stella marina, and Maria lactans—in a word, as the Panagía Aphroditissa of Cyprus”. (Marcovich, 1996, 57–8) Similarly, Stephen Benko wrote that Marian piety was “the natural outgrowth of the goddess-cults in the ancient world”, and that, in “its veneration of the Virgin Mary, not only did Roman Catholic Christianity absorb many elements of the cults of Greek and Roman goddesses, but Mary in effect replaced these deities and continued them in a Christian form.” (Benko, 1993, 2–4) Both Benko and Marcovich were writing at a time when Classical scholarship on this subject found itself dovetailing with popular culture and this coalition has served to create an enduring ontological legacy, a belief that “Christianity deliberately adopted the images and symbols of powerful goddesses for saints and the Virgin Mary.” (Monaghan, 2010, ix)

At the same time that Classicists such as Benko and Marcovich were reading Marian iconography as evidence for the Christian assimilation of earlier beliefs, however, Anthropologists were acknowledging that such projections of syncretism were unsustainable given the documented experience of modern missionaries and the overwhelming and trans-national evidence of cultural resistance to the imposition of extrinsic ideologies. In his analysis of a penitential fraternity centred in the South-west of the United States, Carlo Severi, for example, has argued that the cult of *Lady Sebastiana*, rather than preserving an amalgam of indigenous and imported beliefs, “re-uses” (in a Warburgian sense) “preexisting materials in order to invent a new image” contradicting the various preceding traditions “in an almost sacrilegious way, thereby signalling a crisis in the traditional cult and the birth of a new belief.” (Severi, 2015, 319–320)

Could it not be that we witness a similar phenomenon in the Marian iconography of late antiquity? Not the survival of earlier cultic practises but, rather, their deliberate erasure?

This paper will explore that question in regard to representations of the Madonna Stella Maris (Our Lady, Star of the Sea) and the extent to which such representations may have served as a vector for the erasure of pre-existing goddess worship. To what extent did the proliferation of this maritime aspect of the Marian cultus contradict the earlier traditions of those goddesses, and to what extent did it signal “a crisis in the traditional cult and the birth of a new belief”?

Works Cited

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Ave, maris stella, Dei mater alma, atque semper virgo, felix cœli porta. Sumens illud œAve Gabrielis ore, funda nos in pace, mutans Evā nomen. Solve vincla reis, profer lumen cœcis, mala nostra pelle, bona cuncta posce. Loosen the chains of the guilty, Send forth light to the blind, Our evil do thou dispel, Entreat (for us) all good things. Show thyself to be a Mother: Through thee may he receive prayer Who, being born for us, Undertook to be thine own. Ave Maris Stella is a hymn for the Blessed Virgin Mary that has been a favorite of religious for centuries and can help you get closer to her as well! (The Divine Office is a special collection of scripture readings, psalms, and hymns that constitute what is known as the Prayer of the Church. It is also called the Liturgy of the Hours. Priests and other religious are required to pray sections from the Liturgy of the Hours each day.) Ave Maris Stella has been set to music over the centuries by such famous composers as Palestrina, Dufay, Monteverdi, Dvorak, and Grieg. It is still used today in the Divine Office and what is known as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (The original Latin text can be found here.) Our Lady proclaimed to Saint Bridget of Sweden that whoever sings the Ave Maris Stella would be guarded from any harm. During a riot in Rome, Bridget prayed, œMy power will break the malice of Thy enemies: if Mine crucified Me, it is because I permitted it. Our Lady urged her along with her companions to sing this song as a group and she would protect them from danger. Hail, O Star of the ocean, God's own Mother blest, ever sinless Virgin, gate of heavenly rest. Taking that sweet Ave, which from Gabriel came, peace confirm within us, changing Eve's name. Break the sinners' fetters, make our blindness day, Chase all evils from us, for all blessings pray.