

## **The Sexuality of Christ in Byzantine Art and in Hypermodern Oblivion**

Matthew J. Milliner, Wheaton College

### **Introduction**

Here is the fantasy of many an academic: Imagine that in your given historical sub-field there was an obvious, inherently fascinating and immediately relevant topic that was ignored for centuries, but you had the thrill of discovering it. You delivered a lecture on the subject at a prestigious institution; the lecture then became an article published in the field's most intimidating journal. The scholarly response was enormous - enthusiastic embraces and spirited rebuttals filled the pages of major academic reviews. Your article then became a book that shattered the narrow borders of academic specialization and gained headline treatment in more widely disseminated forums: *The New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Le Monde*, *Spectator*, etc. In fact, responses to your book were so numerous that it then became *another* book, a 417 page one this time - with no less than 34 additional excurses where you further unpacked your discovery alongside witty, exhaustive, and occasionally devastating responses to each and every one of your critics.

This is what happened when a lecture at Columbia University became a 1983 article that ran in *October* entitled "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern

Oblivion” by Leo Steinberg.<sup>1</sup> What was Steinberg’s shattering discovery? It was the *ostentatio genitalium* – the inexplicably overlooked, but now quite obvious emphasis on Christ’s genitals in Renaissance art. **(Fig. 1)** Just as importantly, Steinberg claimed to have uncovered the neglected theological rationale for such depictions, a rationale that secularized “modern oblivion” had blinded us to. This was the insistence, grounded in the Council of Chalcedon in 451, on the full *humanity* of Jesus Christ. Such images, claimed Steinberg, were “neither a licentious conceit nor thoughtless truckling to antique example,”<sup>2</sup> which is how they were so long interpreted. This was not mere naturalism. These deeply Christian artists obeyed “imperatives deeper than modesty.”<sup>3</sup> They attempted to show how Christ “regained for man his prelapsarian condition.”<sup>4</sup> **(Fig. 2)** Steinberg’s prose even had a patristic ring, extending the recapitulation theory of Irenaeus of Lyons: “For as the first effect of Paradise lost was the punishing of shame of the pudenda, so the acceptable sign of restoral is the uncovering of the New Adam in token of Eden regained.”<sup>5</sup> Hence Steinberg’s assertion that “[t]he drive of Renaissance artists to pursue this discovery [of Christ’s sexuality] even to the unspeakable is religious and Christian.”<sup>6</sup> As doubting Thomas had to stick his finger in Christ’s wound, as the miracle of the Gregory Mass assured those who doubted transubstantiation, so did the

---

<sup>1</sup> Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded (University of Chicago Press, 1996), henceforth SC. Originally, Leo Steinberg, “The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion,” *October*, Vol. 25 (Summer, 1983). Without cataloging all the responses alluded to above (each journal I mentioned reviewed SC), it is enough to say that a mark of the success of Steinberg’s argument is probably that it is one of very few arguments authorized by both the Marxist *October* and the conservative religious journal, *First Things* (Diane Phillips, “Leo Steinberg’s Artistic Vision,” *First Things*, December 2011). I wonder if it is fair to suggest that Steinberg’s book may be the last time in recent memory where serious Renaissance art history got this much attention.

<sup>2</sup> SC, 21.

<sup>3</sup> SC, 19.

<sup>4</sup> SC, 19.

<sup>5</sup> SC, 14.

<sup>6</sup> SC, 226.

*ostentatio genitalium* assure Renaissance era Christians that Christ was truly man.<sup>7</sup> (**Fig. 3**) The Saviour's phallus was "unbelief overruled."<sup>8</sup> And this was, moreover, a uniquely *art historical* manifestation. "The book's central premise," asserts Steinberg, is that "images were not illustrations of an antecedent [verbal] idea, but [they were that idea's] original formulation." Because "artists," Steinberg tells us, "must make decisions which more modest Christians are spared."<sup>9</sup>

But Steinberg's arguments were not limited to the images of the infant Christ. He pointed out the blood hyphen, where a red trail leads to and emphasizes Christ's groin (**Fig. 4**). Its purpose was to connect his first wound – circumcision – and his last. But what about the shocking conclusion to Steinberg's argument: The Christ who is controversially erect? (**Fig. 5**) Steinberg claimed that he found the rationale for these images as well – a corrective to the "disobedience of the postlapsarian penis."<sup>10</sup> If for Augustine a mark of the fall was lack of control of the sexual organs,<sup>11</sup> the resurrection had to set things straight. Hence, in such depictions, *all* of Christ's humanity has been raised. Steinberg also relates the phallus here to power.<sup>12</sup> Lucas Cranach's blatant example of the tumescent Savior (**Fig. 6**), combined with a literal (and quite unorthodox) depiction of God the Father as male amounts to a patriarchal supernova of sorts – a worst case scenario of projecting maleness onto the Trinity. But Steinberg was not troubled by feminist critiques.

---

<sup>7</sup> SC, 354.

<sup>8</sup> SC, 237.

<sup>9</sup> SC, 252.

<sup>10</sup> SC, 318.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Book 14:16.

<sup>12</sup> SC, 89.

As suggested, there were innumerable responses to Steinberg's book, and I can here point out only a few of the most challenging. While Steinberg was "not inclined to speculate on the inner motives of painters who chose to involve the sexuality of Christ in their iconography," Richard Trexler was less reticent.<sup>13</sup> He pointed out many cases – and implied there were many more – where these images *did* cause sexual arousal among the faithful.<sup>14</sup> The most famous response came from the medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum. The author of *Jesus as Mother* stretched herself into the realm of art history in order to correct Steinberg's hyper-masculine Jesus with womanly images of Christ from within the same period.<sup>15</sup> In Quirizio of Murano's *The Saviour* (**Fig. 7**), for example, Bynum claims there is evidence of Christ as a nursing mother with breasts, and she marshals much textual evidence to back up her claim.

As mentioned, Steinberg had the opportunity to respond to these accusations, hence the thirty some excurses in the full version of his argument, including an entirely separate section entitled *Ad Bynum* where he deflects accusations of his own sexism by accusing Bynum of textism, letting the words control images. Steinberg doubles down,<sup>16</sup> digs his heels in, and insists that Chalcedonian orthodoxy is what motivates the full depiction of

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Trexler, "Gendering Jesus Crucified," in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, Brendan Cassidy, ed., (Princeton: Department of Art & Archaeology, 1993), 107-119. Steinberg suggests Trexler misread him (SC, 225 n. 11). For an argument that medieval vision was less sexually charged, see Margaret Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Trexler's argument has been expanded and updated by Corine Schleif, "Christ Bared: Problems of Viewing and Powers of Exposing," in Sherry C.M. Lindquist, ed. *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 258ff.

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 79-117. Originally, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39.3 (Autumn, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Steinberg joked that he was tempted to entitle the second edition "Double or Nothing." SC, 219.

Jesus' gender. His opponents refuse the obvious (**Fig. 8**). Steinberg described his debate with his detractors as “an unequal combat between overwhelming evidence and denial by desperation.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Byzantine Blind Side**

But Byzantium, this Byzantinist is not surprisingly convinced, was the blind side of Steinberg's argument, one that few if any of his critics thoroughly engaged. Steinberg was not content to point out the merits of his Renaissance artists. In perfect step with the grandfather of art history, Giorgio Vasari, Steinberg had to bash the Byzantine as well. To not depict Christ's genitals, as the Byzantines did not, Steinberg insisted, was to “decarnify the Incarnation itself.”<sup>18</sup> Renaissance art, for Steinberg, was not one way, but the only way – “the first and last phase of Christian art that can claim full Christian orthodoxy.”<sup>19</sup> The Late Antique tradition may have started off well, says Steinberg, as evidenced by a fifth-century mosaic in Ravenna. (**Fig. 9**) But then the Byzantines edited Christ's gender away, as evidenced by mosaics from the 11<sup>th</sup> century (**Fig. 10**). Steinberg calls this the Byzantine “interdiction.” It betrays a “puritanical ethos” and “centuries of denial.” This “guiltless groin” was the “token of a sinless-hence-sexless humanity.”<sup>20</sup> The Orthodox, for Steinberg, are unorthodox: “The hieratic Christs of Byzantine art are better adapted to Gnostic heresies than to a theology of the Incarnation.”<sup>21</sup> And in going this far, Steinberg, to use his own gambling metaphor, overplayed his hand.

---

<sup>17</sup> SC, 344.

<sup>18</sup> SC, 18.

<sup>19</sup> SC, 70-71.

<sup>20</sup> SC, 139, 365, 244.

<sup>21</sup> SC, 70.

Not surprisingly, more recent studies are dissatisfied with the use medieval nudity – or lack of it – as a foil to Christ’s nudity in the Renaissance sphere. In the latest extensive study of the subject, Sherry Linquist points out that “medieval representations of sacred flesh can subsume both Steinberg’s and Bynum’s meanings and more besides.”<sup>22</sup> We are seeing, in Linquist’s words, “how inadequate is the stereotypical narrative that posits that medieval people rejected the body in favor of the spirit, and that this attitude was overturned by the lever of Renaissance Humanism.”<sup>23</sup> This is a “simplistic narrative that leaves out over a thousand formative years.”<sup>24</sup> Although the volume I am citing does not focus on the Byzantine, evidence from Byzantium further confirms this new understanding.

### **The Byzantine Nude**

Although studies of this particular subject in Byzantium have lagged behind other fields,<sup>25</sup> thanks to recent work we have ample evidence for male and female nudes in the Byzantine sphere. “The Byzantines afforded nudity a bigger role in their art than might be supposed,” explains Henry Maguire, “even though they gave to it quite different connotations from those which applied in the Renaissance.”<sup>26</sup> So long as nakedness was conjoined with ascetic discipline that freed it from desire, it was not shameful. Nude saints, such as Saint Onouphrios or St. Mary of Egypt, were depicted in sanctuaries.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Sherry Lindquist, ed., *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> For an early study, see B. Zeitler, “Ostentatio genitalium: Displays of Nudity in Byzantium,” in *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, ed. L. James (Aldershot, 1999), 185-201.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 97. Myrto Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> As at Lagoudera where the artist admittedly covered the genitals. Maguire, *Other Icons*, 104.

The textual record leaves us no excuse to be surprised at such images. A famous trope from the Heavenly Ladder – among the severest examples of Byzantine asceticism – boasts of a saint “who, in looking at beauty, highly glorified the Creator for it. And from one look at it, became immersed in God’s love and in the source of tears. And it was amazing to see that what was the slough of perdition for one, for another supernaturally became a crown.”<sup>28</sup> The motif continued in the Middle Byzantine period.<sup>29</sup>

But direct depictions of the genitals are attested as well. Ancient statues were sometimes recycled while retaining their nudity in a Christian context.<sup>30</sup> (**Fig. 11**) Byzantine artists also employed the vocabulary of nudity to communicate “grotesque, humorous, or mocking overtones,” as evidenced by *grylloi* or decorative naked warriors.<sup>31</sup> There was even a case, in the twilight of Byzantium, where Manuel Chrysoloras, who would have seen Renaissance art, insisted, “It is not disgraceful to gaze at the beauties of statues and paintings [because] we are not admiring the beauties of the bodies [themselves] in these [works of art] but the beauty of the mind that made them... [and] how much more is the nobility of [the] mind [of God].”<sup>32</sup>

### **Clothing and the Cross**

---

<sup>28</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 179. Pavel Florenskiy sees in such “innocence... the illumination and spiritualization of sex, not its sexless and unilluminated removal: the blossoming of sex, not castration.” Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, tr. Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 226. Cf. Kyle Harper’s treatment of similar material in *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 190-236.

<sup>29</sup> See Symeon the New Theologian’s praising of his mentor, Saint Symeon Eulabes the Studite for being “not ashamed at the limbs of anyone, neither to see other men naked, nor to be seen naked” (Hymn 15:205ff). The hymn will be discussed more extensively below.

<sup>30</sup> Maguire, *Other Icons*, 128.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>32</sup> Letter addressed to Demetrius Chrysoloras, PG 156, 57C-60B. Cited in Maguire, *Other Icons*, 134.

But did the Byzantines go so far in depicting the subject of Steinberg's book and the present paper, the particular body of *Christ*? Without space for an extensive overview, it is enough to say that the visual history of this subject is considerably more complex than Steinberg's few paragraphs on the subject convey. Based on a straightforward reading of the gospels where soldiers gambled for Christ's clothing (Mt. 27:35, Jn 19:23-4), it was originally assumed in early Christian art that Christ was naked, as reflected in the Maskell ivory, the first attested narrative crucifixion. **(Fig. 12)** "Naked" in this case, however, does not entail complete nudity, as "stripped" (*nudus*) did not necessarily mean the removal of the undergarment (*perizoma*).<sup>33</sup> This "loincloth nude" tradition was inherited by Byzantium. The image Steinberg chooses of Christ showing his genitals from the Arian baptistery at Ravenna **(Fig. 9)**, while mirrored at the Orthodox baptistery in the same town, is not necessarily representative, and is soon eclipsed. Steinberg understands this, but he does not explore the reasons why. Based on apocryphal influences and confusion arising from the multiple garments referred to in the gospels, the *colobium* – a purple (Mk 15:17) or scarlet (Mt. 27:28) covering – overtakes the iconography in Byzantium from the sixth to the eighth centuries. **(Fig. 13)** The *colobium* may have been understood as symbolic of Christ's human flesh,<sup>34</sup> or may have been a means of further distinguishing the body of Christ from naked idols.<sup>35</sup> And yet, from the

---

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Hallett, *The Roman nude: heroic portrait statuary, 200BC-AD300* (Oxford, 2005), 61. Such nudity had not only shameful, but also heroic connotations in the ancient world, hence a nude Jesus could align him "with the heroes of Greco-Roman myth, with divinities and figures of public prominence." Felicity Harley-McGowan, "The Maskell Passion Ivories and Greco-Roman art: notes on the iconography of crucifixion," in Juliet Mullins, Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh & Richard Hawtree eds., *Envisioning Christ on the Cross: Ireland and the early medieval West* (Four Courts Press, 2013), 31.

<sup>34</sup> "From her will come the king of Glory," writes John of Damascus, "clothed in the purple of his flesh..." John of Damascus, *Oratio in Nativitatem Sanctae Dei Genitritis Mariae*, 4, 8-12, ed. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 5, 173, trans. P. Voulet, *Homilies sur la Nativité et la Dormition*, Sources chrétiennes 80 (Paris, 1961), 55.

<sup>35</sup> Maguire, *Other Icons*, 97.

seventh century into the second millennium, just at the time when Steinberg sees the beginning of a “puritanical ethos,”<sup>36</sup> the Byzantines move *back* in the direction of original nudity, returning to the loincloth mentioned alongside the *colobium* in the gospels (Mt. 27:31).

The Byzantine art historical record even offers precise evidence for the transitional stage. For example, the Theodore Psalter from 1066 shows both depictions in the same manuscript (**Fig. 14**). Based on an inscription accompanying one icon at Sinai, Rebecca Corrie has suggested that the two forms of clothing were used in this transitional stage to intentional effect – the woolen *colobium*, made from an animal, may have symbolized the mortal body, and the linen loincloth indicated the robe of incorruption.<sup>37</sup> This had liturgical import as well, as the contrast illustrates rhetorical parallels made to the nakedness of Christ and the nakedness of the neophyte being baptized, who had cast off his or her old garments and was given a linen garment in its place.<sup>38</sup> The contrast may also have been an attempt to capture the precise moment of Christ’s death or the moment

---

<sup>36</sup> Restricting himself in the medieval West, Steinberg traces the origin of new coverings to the legend of the Nude Crucifix of Narbonne, attributed to Gregory of Tours in the sixth century (SC, 139-50).

<sup>37</sup> Jerome, drawing on a contrast that goes back to the Pythagoreans, writes that “we have taken off the tunics of skin, then we shall be vested with a garment of linen which has nothing of death in itself but is wholly white.” Cited in J. Quasten, “The Garment of Immortality: A Study of the ‘Accipe Vestem Candidam,’” *Miscellanea Liturgica in onore di sua Eminenza il cardinal Giacomo Lercaro* (Rome, 1966), vol. 1, 391-401.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Cyril of Jerusalem: “Having stripped yourselves, you were naked; in this also imitating Christ, who hung naked on the Cross, and by His nakedness ‘spoiled principalities and powers, and openly triumphed over them on the tree’ [Col. 2:15].” Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, II. 2, ed. and trans. F.L. Cross, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (London, 1951), 59. For more references, Kathleen Corrigan, “Text and Image on an Icon of the Crucifixion at Mount Sinai,” in *The Sacred Image East and West*, Robert Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker, eds. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 53ff. Steinberg mentions a similar text by Theodore of Mopsuestia, and uses it to fault the Byzantines for not depicting Christ’s nudity (SC, 139), which they actually *were* doing when nudity is understood on their terms.

when his soul was separated from his body.<sup>39</sup> Other depictions into the Middle Byzantine period even testify to iconographical indecision as to which method to employ – *colobium* or loincloth.<sup>40</sup> But ultimately the *colobium* was abandoned and Christ was shown dead and naked, except for his loincloth. In short, Steinberg claims that the Byzantines did not depict Christ nude, but when we understand nudity relative to previous depictions, and that “nudity” did not rule out a loincloth, we see that the Byzantines – for precise theological reasons – did exactly that.

The decision to show Christ (relatively) naked served at least three theological functions. According to Anastasius of Sinai, such images could refute the Miaphysites, who suggested that the divine Logos has suffered and died. Anastasius even recommended that a blatant depiction of Christ’s naked body could single out his human nature as having died on the cross.<sup>41</sup> Images of a dead, naked Christ also contested the Islamic suggestion that Christ did not really die on the cross.<sup>42</sup> In addition, depicting the crucified Christ offered further refutation of the Iconoclasts. “How,” asked the iconophile Patriarch Niceophoros of his opponents, “could he have suffered or been crucified, if he had assumed a body that could not be circumscribed?”<sup>43</sup> The contest with such

---

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, the tenth-century church at Çavuşin. Corrigan, “Text and Image,” 56.

<sup>40</sup> An evident change of mind occurred in the Sinai icon B.32 and the Paris Gregory manuscript. Corrigan, “Text and Image,” 49.

<sup>41</sup> A chief proponent of this idea was Anastasius of Sinai. Hans Belting and Christa Belting-Ihm, “Das Kreuzbild im ‘Hodegos’ des Anastasios Sinaites,” (Freiburg, 1966), 30-39; and Anna Kartsonis, *Anastasis, the Making of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 19, and chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> Kathleen Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters* (Cambridge, 1992), 81-90.

<sup>43</sup> PG, 235 C-D. “The Crucifixion,” writes John Rupert Martin, “is the pivot on which all their [iconophiles] Christological arguments turn.” John Rupert Martin, “Dead Christ on the Cross in Byzantine Art,” in *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, Kurt Weitzmann, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 194.

theological opponents - Miaphysites, Muslims and Iconoclasts - made it the height of Orthodoxy to depict Christ dead and naked in the Middle Byzantine period.

After the decision to abandon the *colobium* and return to the loincloth Christ, the crucified body even becomes newly sensuous, a fact explored in Myrto Hatzaki's recent study of the male nude in Byzantium. (**Fig. 15**) "In its rosy flesh, even in death, Christ's beautiful body was seen to vanquish death... [such depictions] could serve as a (physical) bridge that leads the beholder, through the senses, to contemplation of the divine."<sup>44</sup>

Steinberg claims that "Renaissance art – including the broad movement begun c. 1260 – harnessed the theological impulse and developed the requisite stylistic means to attest the utter carnality of God's humanation in Christ."<sup>45</sup> But such harnessing occurred in Byzantium first.<sup>46</sup>

## The Afterthought of Gender

---

<sup>44</sup> Myrto Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 85.

<sup>45</sup> SC, 71. Steinberg prefers the older "humanation" to "incarnation" because it has some of the force of *Menschwerdung* and the beauty of the Italian *humanato*. I shall use it as well.

<sup>46</sup> There is the question as to whether these Byzantine images show a phallus in the abdominal muscles. Should this difficult-to-prove subliminal depiction be the case then it cuts against Steinberg's arguments (for they were even more blatant with Christ's penis in the Byzantine world) and also against mine (the non-essentialized Byzantine view of gender emphasized below). See, for example, how poor contemporary renditions of the St. Francis' Byzantine-style San Damiano Crucifix can cause a stir in modern congregations: John Estus, "Controversial crucifix creates rift at Warr Acres church," *newsok.com*, April 15, 2010 <http://newsok.com/controversial-crucifix-creates-rift-at-warr-acres-church/article/3453833> Such suggestions are far more subtle in Byzantine contexts, though they may be there (see Sinai crucifixion, Fig. 14). One more recent news story reminds us that the phallic is in the eye of the beholder: "Cab driver banned from displaying phallic cross," *The Telegraph* (May 13, 2011). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8511053/Cab-driver-banned-from-displaying-phallic-cross.html> (both accessed Nov. 30, 2013).

But even when nudity is understood in relative terms, the undergarment being consistent with the inherited understanding of *nudus*, the fact remains that the Byzantines did not – except in very few cases – depict Christ’s genitals. In fact, the new studies I have mentioned, showing that the Byzantines depicted genitals elsewhere, might even intensify Steingberg’s Gnostic accusation. Unless it can be shown that there were theological reasons for refusing to depict Christ’s genitals as well, as indeed there were.

The mainstream Byzantine view of gender is frequently reviewed (and sometimes misconstrued) in theological literature.<sup>47</sup> The classic contrast is between Augustine’s more essentialized understanding of gender,<sup>48</sup> versus Gregory of Nyssa’s “accidental” view. Gender for Gregory of Nyssa is fairly described as an “essentially secondary... ‘economic’ state conditioned by the fallen world, to be transcended in the higher states of virtue.”<sup>49</sup> What is less rehearsed is how this particular view of gender was visualized in Byzantine art. In the *Octateuchs*, Adam and Eve before the fall are sexless creatures, lacking breasts or a penis, indicating “closeness to the divine image, and their angelic-

---

<sup>47</sup> For recent comparisons of Gregory of Nyssa’s anthropoid view of gender see Beth Felker Jones, *Marks of His Wounds: Gender Politics and Bodily Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), and Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), where she asserts: “[P]ostmodern theorists also err in thinking that Gregory can... be constrained into a contemporary secular agenda of ‘gender fluidity’” (282). For a corrective to other misreadings, see John Behr, “The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7:2 (1999).

<sup>48</sup> “Vice will be taken away from those bodies, therefore, and nature preserved. And the sex of a woman is not a vice, but nature. They will then be exempt from sexual intercourse and childbearing, but the female parts will nonetheless remain in being, accommodated not to the old uses, but to a new beauty...” (*City of God* Book 22:12). Such realism causes Beth Felker Jones to side with Augustine. Jones, *Marks of His Wounds*, 95. “To hope, as in the Eastern option, for the dissolution of gender is to bend life away from the body. It is a kind of gnostic escape from diapers, dishes, and the dying” (103). Nevertheless, Eastern depictions of Christ are more in line with Jones’ overall argument (see note 100 below).

<sup>49</sup> John Behr, “The Rational Animal,” 219. It is fair to say Behr’s warnings about misreading Gregory in this article have not been heeded, to say nothing of Gregory’s own warnings: “But we, as far as possible, imagining the truth by conjectures and images, do not expose that which comes to mind straightforwardly, but will set it forth in the form of an exercise for those who consider prudently what they hear.” (*De hominis opificio* 16:15, PG 44:185a).

like prelapsarian appearance.”<sup>50</sup> (**Fig. 16**) But after the fall, they descend into what Peter Brown, describing Gregory of Nyssa’s anthropology, calls God’s “merciful afterthought.”<sup>51</sup> One can just make out Eve’s newly appeared breasts. (**Fig. 17**) Contrast, for instance, a representative example of Adam and Eve in the West, gendered before they have tasted from the fruit. (**Fig. 18**) The decision to not emphasize Christ’s masculinity may then not have been mere prudery or refusal to accept his full humanation – it was grounded in the comparatively less essentialized Eastern view of gender.<sup>52</sup> Simply put, if Steinberg’s Renaissance penis “regained for man his prelapsarian condition,”<sup>53</sup> the exact same rationale would lead to Steinberg’s “guiltless groin” in the East. The Byzantine demurral was by design.

This is not to suggest that the Byzantine Jesus was a eunuch. Instead, such images strike me as the visualization of a liturgical ethos. “Even on occasions when we might expect the Fathers or the liturgical texts to emphasize the maleness of Christ,” writes Kallistos Ware, “surprisingly they often omit to do so.”<sup>54</sup> The Byzantine feast of the circumcision, for example, obviously assumes Christ’s penis, but the themes and hymnography do not emphasize his “maleness as such,” as much as his obedience to the law.<sup>55</sup> Ware’s insight is confirmed by surviving depictions of the feast. (**Fig. 19**) “What matters for [the

---

<sup>50</sup> Mati Meyer, “Eve’s Nudity: A Sign of Shame or Precursor of Christological Economy?” *Between Judaism and Christianity: Art Historical Essays in Honor of Elisheva (Elisabeth) Revel-Neher* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 250. In addition to supplying more images that strengthen this visual case, Meyer argues that far from condemning Eve’s sexuality, these depictions valorize the female, as a first step to the necessarily gendered Theotokos.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 294.

<sup>52</sup> Steinberg identifies places where this understanding influenced the medieval West, crediting them to “East Christian influence” (SC, 249).

<sup>53</sup> SC, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Kallistos Ware and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2000), 87-88.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Fathers],” continues Ware, “is not that he became male (άνήρ, *vir*) but the fact that he became human (άνθρωπος, *homo*).”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the word άνθρωπος, employed in the Nicene Creed, is the general category for humanity that includes both men and women, a fact that overt phallic imagery might obscure. But before this is pursued further, it is necessary to challenge Steinberg’s reading of one place in Middle Byzantine devotional literature where the male member was singled out.

### **Byzantium’s “Marian Male”**

In Symeon the New Theologian, Steinberg claims to have found his fifth column in the Byzantine camp. Indeed, Symeon’s Hymns on the theme of Divine Eros have been described as the equivalent to “a theologian [today] composing explicit rap lyrics about the nature of divine love....” Here is the excerpt cited with relish by Steinberg:

We become members of Christ – and Christ becomes our members...  
 I move my hand, and my hand is the whole Christ  
 since, do not forget it, God is indivisible in His divinity...  
 Do not accuse me of blasphemy, but welcome these things...  
 since if you wish you will become a member of Christ,  
 and similarly all our members individually  
 will become members of Christ and Christ our members  
 and all which is dishonorable in us He will make honorable...  
 Now, well, you recognized Christ in my finger,  
 And in this organ... – did you not shudder or blush?  
 But God was not ashamed to become like you  
 And you, you are ashamed to be like Him?  
 – No, I am not ashamed to be like Him  
 but, when you said, like a shameful member,  
 I feared that you were uttering blasphemy  
 – Well, you were wrong to fear...  
 If, in your body, you have put on the total Christ,  
 You will understand without blushing all that I am saying...<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> SC, 245. Steinberg used George A. Maloney’s 1976 translation *Hymna of Divine Love by St. Symeon the New Theologian* (Denville, New Jersey, 1976), 54-55. The more recent translation that I will employ below

Steinberg is not wrong to see here a reference to the male member. Griggs translates such passages more directly: “both my finger and my penis are Christ.”<sup>58</sup> Based on Symeon’s evocation of the male member, Steinberg concludes that “the banishing of the penis from the Incarnate’s body would have drawn sharp disapproval from [Symeon].”<sup>59</sup>

But to isolate the penis in this hymn (Symeon was, after all, an eunuch) is to miss the larger point.<sup>60</sup> The overarching theme of Hymn 15 is the transcendent God’s saturation of all. The hymn offers a fine encapsulation of patristic metaphysics: “You are wholly outside of creation, wholly in every creature. The whole of You fills all things, yet You are completely outside of everything... For You are in the all, You are above the all.”<sup>61</sup> As a result, despite being “above the nature of nature,” God can wholly suffuse even “me [Symeon], the dejected one.”<sup>62</sup> But not only Symeon. Female anatomy – overlooked by Steinberg – is equally, if not more, pervasive. “Look at Christ in the womb and notice the things in the womb, and escaping the womb, and from whence my God went out and passed through... *no one* imitating him need be ashamed.”<sup>63</sup> In the same hymn where the male member is referred to, Symeon primarily speaks of the soul in the *vox feminina*. “His imagery,” in the words of McGuckin, “presses the erotics of the ancient theme of

---

is from Daniel K. Griggs, *Divine Eros: Hymns of Saint Symeon the New Theologian* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2010) [henceforth, *Divine Eros*].

<sup>58</sup> *Divine Eros*, 87 (15:165).

<sup>59</sup> SC, 244.

<sup>60</sup> Among other reasons not to overly emphasize phallic imagery in this poem is because Symeon was probably castrated for court service as an eunuch when a boy. John McGuckin, “Symeon the New Theologian’s Hymns of Divine Eros: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition,” *Spiritus* 5 (2005), 183 and 199.

<sup>61</sup> *Divine Eros*, 84, 85 (15:64-65, 103).

<sup>62</sup> *Divine Eros*, 84 (15:67), 82 (15:25).

<sup>63</sup> *Divine Eros*, 89 (15:200).

‘Christ’s bridal chamber’ to the limit.”<sup>64</sup> Of course, this is standard fare for Christian mysticism in the Middle Ages, but Symeon takes it up several centuries before medieval nuns will.<sup>65</sup> A few lines later he mentions women again – citing his mentor who could look at them lustlessly.<sup>66</sup> The hymn concludes by singling out women again by alluding to Joel 2:16, “But gather together, O children, but come, O women!”<sup>67</sup>

What is more, all Christians in this hymn are advised to be female, so they can receive the Christ inside themselves eucharistically. “They acquire the holy seed, as we said, receiving the whole transformed God within themselves.”<sup>68</sup> Steinberg is dismayed that Byzantine artists did not depict the penis of Christ, and suggests – based on this hymn – that “the author of this idiosyncratic text would not have wanted a holy icon to lack Christ’s ‘hidden members’”<sup>69</sup> But Symeon clearly indicates in this very hymn why he would not have so counseled iconographers. “They are hidden members of Christ, for they are covered and on account of this they are more revered than the rest (I Cor 12:23).”<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, there may have been illustrations of Symeon’s devotional ethos, using not the phallic, but womb imagery instead. As we’ve seen, for Symeon, all laypeople had to

---

<sup>64</sup> John McGuckin, “Symeon the New Theologian’s Hymns of Divine Eros,” 197. If Kyle Harper concludes that the Late Antique Christian tradition is “anti-erotic to its very foundation” (*From Shame to Sin*, 244), then Symeon’s rhetoric suggests that in Byzantium, some of the ice may have thawed.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> See note 30 above.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 91 (15:250). Symeon does the same thing elsewhere: “It is possible for all men, brethren, not only for monks but for laymen as well, to be penitent at all times and constantly... John Chrysostom bears witness with me... [saying] this is possible for one who has wife and children, men and women...” *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, C.J. de Catanzaro, trans. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 93.

<sup>68</sup> *Divine Eros*, 90 (15:230).

<sup>69</sup> SC, 245.

<sup>70</sup> *Divine Eros*, 88 (15:169).

be Eucharistically Marian: “[E]ach conceives in like manner to her within himself the God of all, as she bore Him in herself.”<sup>71</sup> Such an idea was perhaps suggested with Mary’s visualization on the Eucharistic paten, made at the same time that Symeon was writing.<sup>72</sup> (**Fig. 20**) But there may also be evidence for a hitherto unexamined Middle Byzantine motif of what I will call the “Marian male.” (**Fig. 21**) At St. Nicholas Kasnitzi in Kastoria, a peculiar twelfth-century image of St. Menas is painted above the church exit.<sup>73</sup> This history of Menas iconography is admittedly complex, but nowhere in the literature that I am aware of has a rather visually obvious point about such images been made – a point as evident as Steinberg’s Renaissance penises. Menas is pregnant, as evidenced by comparing it to the Marian paten image just mentioned.<sup>74</sup> (**Fig. 20**) Such images may very well be riffing on the famous Blachernitissa icon of Mary, which shows Christ in her womb.<sup>75</sup> That it is a Eucharistic pregnancy is strengthened by the fact that contemporaneous to the Menas depiction, the *melismos* (the Eucharist depicted as a child on the paten) began to appear in Byzantine churches.<sup>76</sup> In short, Byzantine art may have

---

<sup>71</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *St. Symeon the New Theologian, On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, trans. Alexander Golitzin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 60.

<sup>72</sup> The inscription reads, “Thy womb is become a Holy Table offering up the bread from heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ, of which whosoever shall eat shall not die, according to the promise of the Heavenly Father who feeds us all.” Chelandari Monastery online catalogue: <http://www.elpenor.org/athos/en/e218ci8.asp> (accessed Nov, 30, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> A limited discussion of the church can be found in Tatiana Malmquist, *Byzantine 12<sup>th</sup> Century Frescoes in Kastoria: Agioi Anargyroi and Agios Nikolaos tou Kasnitzi* (Upsalla University doctoral dissertation, 1979).

<sup>74</sup> The latest study on St. Menas iconography, while offering a convincing and thorough genealogy, makes no mention of any Marian connection, nor am I aware of any study that does. Warren T. Woodfin, “An Officer and a Gentleman: Transformations in the Iconography of a Warrior Saint,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 60 (2006), 111-143. Rhetoric of Christ in the womb of the heart is frequent in Patristic literature, East and West. For a survey from a Roman Catholic perspective, see John Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 103-117.

<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of the Blachernai icon through the lens of “power,” see Bissera Pentcheva, *Icons and Power* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press), 145-163.

<sup>76</sup> Barbara Sweeney Mustain, “The Melismos: the child as sacrifice in Byzantine art,” (M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1979); Robert Taft, “Melismos and Communion: The Fraction and its Symbolism in the Byzantine Tradition,” in *Traditio et progression: Studi liturgici in onore del Prof. Adreino Nocent*,

depicted Symeon's hymn, making virtually the opposite point that Steinberg expected Symeon himself would have endorsed: not an emphasis on Christ's masculinity, but an emphasis on the femininity of all Christians, male and female.<sup>77</sup>

### **A Different Flash of Flesh**

An emphasis on the body of Christ, which includes men and women, leads to one last contention with Steinberg's dismissal of Byzantine art. He is certainly right about the need for a somatic highlight to drive home the humanity of Jesus – except it was not the penis. It was a part of the body that more neatly corresponds with Symeon's dual gendered ecclesiology – a part of the body that men and women share, and which more appropriately conveys the “lower” aspect of human nature than Steinberg is after, for the leg and foot are lower than the genitals. Steinberg perceives the significance of this, but again, he over-privileges Italian accomplishments. Steinberg discerns the beginning of the leg and foot motif in a Byzantine-influenced Italian icon by Coppo di Marcovaldo, where one can see Christ's leg exposed. (**Fig. 22**) From this point forward, he contends, more and more skin will be shown.<sup>78</sup> But rather than Coppo beginning a strip tease, the

---

OSB, ed. G. Fardnedi (Rome, 1988), 531-32. St. George Kurbinovo (1191) appears to be one of the first depictions.

<sup>77</sup> Perhaps Symeon is even a resource to combat the anti-Semitism that has so afflicted Byzantine Christianity. In the same hymn, Symeon's theology of the *totus Christus* leads him to suggest that he – by virtue of his baptism – has become Jewish. “When we hear that these things happened long ago in the house of David we are astonished! These things would be as follows: we are the house of David since we are the same race as him... we are children of David, all your divine seed...” *Divine Eros*, 86 (15:116-118,126). Compare Robert Jenson: “The church and the synagogue are together and only together the present availability to the world of the risen Jesus Christ.” Robert Jenson, “Toward a Christian Theology of Judaism,” in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *Jews and Christians: People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 13.

<sup>78</sup> SC, 28ff.

bare leg actually started long before Coppo, and has a level of significance that certainly exceeds Steinberg's interpretation.

For the Byzantines, there was a far more important ways to indicate God's full debasement – not his sex as much as his willingness to suffer. The Greek scholar Chrysanthe Baltoyianni and the American art historian Rebecca Corrie have argued that the bare leg of Christ, as it appears in the Lagoudera frescoes dating to 1192 on the island of Cyprus, is a deliberate reference not to nudity, but to the Eucharistic lamb (**Fig. 23**). Why would the leg be emphasized? One need go no further than the Orthodox liturgy for the feast of the Presentation to Symeon, which is what this fresco is referencing. Exodus 12:9 describes the preparation of the Passover lamb, "Eat it roasted, its head *with its legs*." The ultimate symbol of God's debasement was not only that God would assume a particular gender, but that he would be consumed, just as he would be by the faithful who ingested the Eucharist right next to these very frescoes. There are many texts that confirm this understanding: "Since he offered as an image the sheep of the lamb of God," writes Ammonios of Alexandria, "one nurtures oneself on the head of Christ, receiving from him the lessons of theology, (one nurtures oneself) on the legs, learning about his incarnate Dispensation."<sup>79</sup>

Across the naos in the same church is a similar scene (**Fig. 24**) – perhaps from the moment before, just before Mary gave Christ to Symeon. Here we see the limb of God

---

<sup>79</sup> PG 85, 1513B. Cited in Chrysanthe Baltoyianni, "Christ the Lamb and the ἐνώπιον of the Law in a Wall Painting of Araka on Cyprus," *Δελτίον ΧΑΕ* 17 (1993-1994), Περίοδος Δ'. Στη μνήμη της Ντούλας Μουρίκη (1934-1991)• Σελ. 53-58. John the Baptist, to the right of Symeon, holds a scroll reading "Behold the Lamb of God."

(pun intended) emphasized again, while the angels showing his sacrificial fate hover above. But Orthodox Christians, like Steinberg's Renaissance Christians, also needed a reminder of Christ's humanity, a flash of flesh to drive it all home. This image accomplished this not by unveiling the Christ child's maleness, but his foot. Steinberg even offers evidence for this himself when he quotes the Church Father Cyril of Jerusalem, who declares, "the head means the Godhead of Christ, the feet his manhood."<sup>80</sup> But he never points out that that this was overwhelmingly true in art well before the Renaissance. The depiction of Christ's genitals is only necessary to preach the full humanity of Christ if one's view of humanity overly prioritizes sex. But if sex is secondary, as it was for the Byzantines, then the foot, which men and women share, will suffice.

### **The Numbers**

One last point is the relative scarcity of Steinberg's images, a point first picked up upon by Margaret Miles. Drawing upon Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art*, Miles points out that Steinberg's phallogentric Renaissance images were for an elite. The Virgin Mother, suggests Miles, was, for the Tertullian, "the great proof of Christ's true humanity."<sup>81</sup> It was her "pure blood' that supplied his flesh, it was she who gave the Word a body."<sup>82</sup> Indeed, "This strong visual and verbal popular interest in the role and power of the Virgin is the immediate context for the images of the nude Christ discussed

---

<sup>80</sup> SC, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Tertullian, *De Carne Christie*, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

by Steinberg.”<sup>83</sup> Such images were so pervasive, surmises Miles, that images of the phallic Jesus “may even present a conscious protest to contemporary visual and verbal interest in the Virgin.... Images of the nude Christ may have served, rather, to provide for ‘Renaissance man’ visual images that confirmed his precariously inflated self image.”<sup>84</sup> The body’s best show of power, says Miles, was not an erect resurrected penis, but the “female capacity for conceiving, giving birth, and nourishing human life seem the strongest and most obvious candidate for the human body’s most dramatic power.”<sup>85</sup>

Steinberg’s brief response to Miles is amusing but dismissive. Defending his suggestion that sex is a show of power, he says, “Had the Trinity’s Second Person incarnated as woman, she would doubtless have resurrected in spectacular pregnancy.”<sup>86</sup> But he does not address Miles’ suggestion about Mary, and, most importantly, he does not address her appeal to numbers. And on this particular point, later scholarship – which I can only briefly summarize – has proven Miles fantastically correct.

To prove his thesis, Steinberg appeals that “no less than 124 pictures are [now] reproduced in this text.”<sup>87</sup> Were all of them to be catalogued, he claims, “the present archive of Renaissance images wherein the emphasis on the genitalia of Christ is assertive and central [would run] ... past a thousand.”<sup>88</sup> But when it comes to icons of the Virgin Mary and Christ baring his leg and foot, produced at same time as Steinberg’s Renaissance penises, one thousand is small change. In order to counterbalance the

---

<sup>83</sup> Margaret R. Miles, “Nudity, Gender, and Religious Meaning in the Italian Renaissance,” *Art as Religious Studies* (Crossroads, NY: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1990), 108.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>86</sup> SC, 325.

<sup>87</sup> SC, 109.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

Renaissance neglect of “Greek” art, Anthony Cutler explains that “everywhere Cennini and his contemporaries looked they saw the art that we call medieval.”<sup>89</sup> One oft-cited contract from 1499 lists a Madonna and Child order of 700 Cretan icons, 500 “*a la latina*” and 200 “*a la greca*.”<sup>90</sup> Just one surviving contract comes close to Steinberg’s projected (but not proven) total number of phallic Jesuses. The market for these images was not select humanist circles, but the Venetian bourgeoisie and the entire Mediterranean network of monasteries.<sup>91</sup> This artistic ethos has been accurately described as “small scale industrial production.”<sup>92</sup> Art historians have noticed this, and have dismissed it, coining the unflattering term “madonnaro,” long used to refer to Cretan artists of the post-Byzantine period. **(Fig. 25)** If our interest is to isolate unique, aesthetically noteworthy images, this proliferation is not helpful. But if our aim is to understand what average Christians employed in routine devotion, such images must be engaged.

The proliferation of such Byzantine images in the Renaissance and beyond is impossible to calculate. A particularly famous example of such a foot-flashing icon, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, easily boasts an international resume of present day shrines. **(Fig. 26)** This can be complemented, for readers of this paper, with an appeal to Chicago locality. There is a massive shrine dedicated to the same image a few miles away from Hyde Park in Bridgeport, and another church dedicated to the image in Little Italy (where the icon

---

<sup>89</sup> Anthony Cutler, “The Pathos of Distance: Byzantium in the Gaze of Renaissance Europe and Modern Scholarship,” in *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450-1650*, Claire Farago, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>90</sup> Nano Chatzidakis, *Venetiae quasi alterum Byzantium: From Candia to Venice: Greek Icons in Italy 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, exhibition catalogue, Correr Museum, Venice (Athens, 1993), 2, note 7.

<sup>91</sup> Manolis Chatzidakis, *Études sur la peinture postbyzantine* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976), 210-211.

<sup>92</sup> Anastasia Drandaki, “Greek Religious Painting After the Fall of Constantinople: Tradition and Renewal” in *From Byzantium to Modern Greece: Hellenic Art in Adversity: 1453-1830* (New York: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 2005), 16.

reportedly saved the church from the great fire of 1871). Reports of another “miraculous” event connected to such an image in Glenview are being evaluated as I write.<sup>93</sup> (**Fig. 27**)

Hypermodern visual culture – the “optocracy” as Marie-José Mondzain calls it<sup>94</sup> – is far more powerful, and considerably less secular, now than when Steingberg first made his argument.<sup>95</sup> “In the age of... fast-circulating visualization technologies,” writes Rosi Braidotti, “the mystical overtones of global icons and the semi-religious cult and following they evoke have become permanent features of our culture.”<sup>96</sup> But there are positive examples of such global icons as well. In the 2012 Sumer Olympics, after winning the gold medal in the 5000 meter race, the Ethiopian Orthodox athlete Meseret Defar’s broadcasted another foot-flashing Jesus to the world. (**Fig. 28**) It was certainly a Symeonic moment, illuminating the idea that Defar’s blessedly fast feet are Christ’s as well, and confirming the postsecular feminist insight that agency “can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety.”<sup>97</sup> The episode was a reminder that the reason we were slow to pick up on the accentuation of Christ’s penis in Renaissance

---

<sup>93</sup> St. Mary of Perpetual Help Parish, Bridgeport, and Holy Family Parish, Little Italy. For the Glenview Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church “miracle,” see “What do you see? Some parishioners call this picture a miracle in the suburbs,” November 22, 2013, wgntv.com <http://wgntv.com/2013/11/22/what-do-you-see-some-parishioners-call-this-picture-a-miracle-in-the-suburbs/> (accessed Nov. 30, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> The “oblivion” in Steinberg’s original essay is a reference to such secularism: “the price paid by the modern world for its massive historical retreat from the mythical grounds of Christianity” (SC, 106). Compare Talaal Asad more recent assessment: “If anything is agreed upon [today], it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable.” Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1. This turn has certainly affected the history of art. Donald Preziosi concludes the latest graduate student primer to art history by asserting that one of the discipline’s chief present concerns is “the (re-)emergence of the problem of religion in art and art history.” Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 507. Nevertheless, Preziosi claims to know that “[t]he essential ‘secret’ of religion, is that there really is no secret at all that is separate from its alleged ‘expression...’ (508). I am puzzled as to how one of the discipline’s most deft deconstructors can be, in this case, a literal essentialist. Art history’s deconstruction evidently has not been thorough enough.

<sup>96</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 2008 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore ), Vol. 25 (6), 12.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

art as emphasized by Steinberg is not only because “we” are secular. It is also because such images were – in the long run of visual culture – anomalous. Recent appearances of phallic Jesuses<sup>98</sup> continue to be dwarfed by their foot-flashing competitors, whose contemporary saturation is all the more difficult to calculate.

Were we to attempt to do so anyway, then this non-statistician would add viewers of the 2012 Olympics to the record-breaking movie *The Avengers*<sup>99</sup> (where the foot-flashing Jesus appears as well, **Fig. 29**), concluding that people who saw this image in two recent instants may have surpassed the amount of people on the entire planet when they were first made.<sup>100</sup> Steinberg’s penises are episodic in the history of art - a lonely island in a sea of visual culture. The overwhelmingly global manner of depicting the full humanation of God in Jesus Christ, from the Middle Ages to our own, has not been the phallus, but the foot.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper, alongside its indulgence in the junior scholar’s penchant for excessive critique of an established one (who no doubt would have had a feisty reply), has attempted to show four things. First, Byzantine art entailed no Gnostic refusal to depict

---

<sup>98</sup> Corine Schleif, “Christ Bared: Problems of Viewing and Powers of Exposing,” in Sherry C.M. Lindquist, ed., *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 257. Schleif lists some examples of Christ’s genitals in contemporary art, to which Bill Viola’s *Man of Sorrows* could be added, as well as the news stories above in note 47.

<sup>99</sup> Scott Collins, “London Olympics: NBC coverage most-watched TV event in U.S. history,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012 <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/13/entertainment/la-et-st-london-olympics-dubbed-mostwatched-event-in-us-history-by-nbc-20120813> *The Avengers* stills holds a sweep of box office records <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/> (both accessed Nov. 30, 2013). I realize that such glimpses are a far cry from how the images were employed in Byzantium – but Meseret Defar’s public victory procession may not be.

<sup>100</sup> Medieval sourcebook: Tables on Population in Medieval Europe <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pop-in-eur.asp> (accessed Nov. 30, 2013).

<sup>101</sup> Similar numbers, I imagine, would work out in regard to the loincloth Jesus.

Christ's naked body. On the contrary, the Byzantines were some of the first to go in this direction, employing his *relatively* nude form for precise theological reasons. Secondly, if Renaissance-era Christians made a prelapsarian point by depicting Christ's penis, the exact same point could be made in Byzantium *without* depicting his genitals due to Byzantium's less essentialized view of sex. Thirdly, one consequence of such reticence is that it accommodates the understanding of the *Christus totus* far more easily. Christ, through his Eucharistic and ecclesial body, scrambles tidy male/female dichotomies, for which I offered a hitherto overlooked Byzantine art historical visualization - the "Marian male."<sup>102</sup> As Renaissance penises were virtually ignored until Steinberg pointed them out, this motif also strikes me as obvious, even if it has been hitherto overlooked. Finally, I showed how the Byzantines expressed Christ's full humanation podiatrically, depictions which, in contrast to Steinberg's Renaissance penises, have enjoyed staggering global success. Which is to say, the history of Byzantine visual culture is not of mere antiquarian but of universal interest, and may have only just begun.

"The aversions to genital nudity of the adult Christ in painted and sculpted representations," contends one recent essay, "and the renewed anxieties focusing on the unclothed Christ today confirm a virilophobia associate with the sacred."<sup>103</sup> Likewise, Madeline Caviness sees the unearthing of scattered accounts of medieval nudity as a "powerful rhetorical tool to cudgel the new fundamentalists."<sup>104</sup> Whether or not such

---

<sup>102</sup> It is not surprising that this would emerge from Byzantine sources. Henri de Lubac concludes his attempt to chart the *corpus mysticum*'s Western neglect by appealing to a standard Byzantine liturgical commentary of Nicholas Cabasilas. Henri Cardinal de Lubac, SJ, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Gemma Simmons, CJ trans. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 328.

<sup>103</sup> Corine Schleif, "Christ Bared," 262.

<sup>104</sup> Madeline Caviness, "Epilogue," in Sherry C.M. Lindquist, ed. *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 331.

cudgeling is advisable, the Byzantine refusal to depict Christ's gender – and the comparative success of this mode of depiction – can certainly help offset hyper-masculine accounts of Christianity, fundamentalist or not. But when the reticence to reveal Christ's genitals, then or now, is dismissed as mere “embarrassment,” Steinberg's error is perpetuated.<sup>105</sup> The refusal to depict Christ's genitals may have involved fear of the naked body; but as I have tried to show, it was also a theologically principled abstention, guarding the mystery of the dual-gendered sexuality of the total Christ.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> “All these more recent examples serve to substantiate Steinberg's claim that Christ exposed sexuality embarrasses modern audiences.” Corine Schleif, “Christ Bared,” 257. This is not at all to contest Schleif's assertion that there are times when we must be “confronted by the naked, the abject or the otherwise atrocious” (274).

<sup>106</sup> Beth Felker Jones expresses the same idea: “The Church, itself the body of Christ, includes the bodies of both women and men as they are incorporated into Christ, even while the irreducible maleness and Jewishness of this Lord mysteriously make way for our own irreducibilities” (*Marks of His Wounds: Gender Politics and Bodily Resurrection*, 2007), 111. See also Elizabeth Johnson's argument that such an understanding is straightforwardly presented in the New Testament (reading Acts 9:5 through Acts 9:2). Johnson adds: “[T]he fact that Jesus of Nazareth was a male human being is not in question. His sex was a constitutive element of his historical person along with other particularities such as his Jewish racial identity.... The heart of the problem is not that Jesus was male, but that more males have not been like Jesus.” Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Crossroads Publishing Company, 2002), 311.