

# Artemis and Thecla. The Meeting of the Ancient Goddess with the Christian Female Apostolic Saint in the First Four Centuries of Christianity (Historical and Comparative Reflections)

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**Abstract:** The paper's subject is about the interaction between the cult of the goddess Artemis and the cult of St Thecla of Iconium throughout the Eastern Mediterranean in the initial four centuries of Christianity in particular. The phenomenon is investigated regarding the literature, the cities, social groups and personalities mostly associated with the cultural meeting of the free-spirited but fearsome goddess protector of the wilderness, virginity and childhood with the virgin heroine of the Cross and alleged apostolic companion of Paul for spreading the Logos of life to the nations.

**Streszczenie:** Tematem artykułu jest interakcja między kultem bogini Artemidy a kultem św. Tekli z Ikonium we wschodniej części basenu Morza Śródziemnego, zwłaszcza w pierwszych czterech wiekach chrześcijaństwa. Zjawisko to jest badane w odniesieniu do literatury, miast, grup społecznych i osobistości związanych głównie z kulturowym spotkaniem wolnomyślniej, ale przerażającej bogini, obrończyni pustyni, dziewictwa i dzieciństwa, z dziewiczą bohaterką Krzyża i domniamaną apostołską towarzyszką Pawła w szerzeniu Logosu życia wśród narodów.

**Keywords:** Isapostle, Paul the Apostle of Nations, goodness

**Słowa kluczowe:** Równy Apostołom, Paweł Apostoł Narodów, bogini



## Introduction

It is really astonishing how quickly the Acts of Thecla (AoTh), a text written in Asia Minor (maybe in Smyrna) about the life and the missionary journeys of St Thecla, the famous female Isapostle (equal to the Apostles) from Iconium, **had already spread across the Mediterranean, as far as Carthago** (Africa Proconsularis) by 200 A.D. The book was probably written around 140 A.D., a period with the charismatic movement still flourishing, and gained both high popularity and canonicity especially among the advocates of a more active, if not equal to men's, involvement of women in the Church, employing the book as a strong argument favoring female priesthood. This trend is also witnessed by Tertullian in his work *De Baptismo* (17.4-5). Despite the authors' removing of his office, the growing impact of his work (the AoTh) remained unaffected. Evidence can be found in (a) the number of manuscripts related, (b) the use of the AoTh as the model text for other literature, and (c) the dynamics of the cult of St. Thecla itself, vivid across the major *mare nostrums*'s urban centers.

In the following lines we will attempt to investigate the causality behind this rapid spread of the AoTh focusing on two main themes: **(A)** The literary form of the book (Barrier, 2009, pp. 15-28). **(B)** The fact that the cult of the female Christian saint functioned as a de facto alternative to the worship of the goddess Artemis, a cult quite active in the 1st -2st A.D. Indeed, in 44 B.C., as Winter (Bruce, 2000, pp.285-294) points out, a new model of womanhood emerges hardly compatible with the traditional type of femineity of the time.

## 1. The literary form and content of the AoTh

We could attribute the text's vast spread to the following factors:

1. The AoTh uses the literary form of the romantic novel (romance) similarly to the romance of Achilles Tatius of Alexandria *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* (in Greek τὰ κατὰ Λευκίππην καὶ Κλειτοφῶντα). The

plot of this ode to purity and virtue is also taking place in the Asia Minor (Ephesus). Although the presbyter-writer of the AoT lost his office, Tatiuz, according to Suda Lexicon, eventually converted to Christianity and even rose up to become a bishop! The genre of romantic novel was particularly popular among women (Davis, 2008, pp. 2-13) in an era moved more by the ear and less by the eye. The plot is the following: Leucippe and Clitophon, the protagonists, fall in love. The couple, especially Leucippe, struggles to keep their purity and fidelity despite the grave dangers and threats (like rape and death), many of them made by people in power, and the social negativism that face in their youth. In the end, their love is victorious.

Back in our case, Thecla from Iconium dedicates herself to the love of Christ yet in the initial chapters of the AoTh appears almost equally attached to Paul, the Apostle of Nations. However, as the plot goes on, Paul's various actions (for example, his refusing to baptize her) present him intentionally self-limited to the role of Thecla's nymphagogus (= the leader of bride) to Christ, which the Apostle appears to claim for himself in 2 Corinthians 11, 2 (comp. John 3, 29). In this way he avoids the relationship of dependence between mystagogue and mystes (initiate). Even so, the bride of Christ Thecla in the age of 17-18 (and not 12-14, which was the usual marriage age for women), strengthened by the spiritual guidance of Paul, ultimately stands by Christ following Leucippe's path of virtue, virginity and courage before fire and beasts.

2. At the same time, the AoTh could be viewed as a form of addendum to the last work of the Pauline corpus, 2 Timothy which contains the legacy of Paul ultimately facing abandonment and persecution. It should be also noted that hints of the genre of the romantic novel are traced by certain researchers in the trilogy of the Pastoral Epistles (Pervo, 1994, pp. 25-47) being themselves regarded as a supplement to the Evangelist Luke's two-volume work to Theophilus (Gospel of Luke and the Acts). Within this pastoral trilogy, just like in the AoTh, Paul operates in places not mentioned by any other text of the NT Canon. Indeed in 2 Timothy Paul stays unharmed from a lion, certain that the Lord will save him while implying that his physical end is at hand (4, 17). Arguably the AoTh not only contribute original information absent in the New Testament Canon, but as also Wallace proves, provide a narrative interpretation of specific Pauline passages (like the 1 Corinthians 6, 7) (Dunn, 2000, pp. 438-454), reconstructing them creatively.

3. Eventually the AoTh enrich the standard information about the Apostle of Nations retrieved by the New Testament Canon without evident declining from Orthodoxy to Gnosticism, despite clearly favoring ascetic practices already thought prevalent in the Church of 2 A.D. At this point we should note that Thecla does not appear in the Acts as companion of Paul, as is the case with the well-known 2nd century couple *Helen and Simon the Wizard*. Simon chose Helen, a Tyrian prostitute, as his wife following Hosea's example symbolizing the relation between Yahweh and his chosen people, Israel (compare Jesus and

the Samaritan woman at the well [John 4]). This way, Helen is saved from captivity and her drama is connected not only with the Proto-history of Genesis but also with the Homeric Helen (Irenaeus 1.23.2-4) (Theissen, 2003, pp. 319-320) playing a leading role in the Iliad, the "Old Testament" of the pagan Greco-Roman Antiquity. Besides, Montanus Phryx was likewise accused by Apollonius ([206 A.D.]) Eusebius, *Church History* 5.18.2a) for destroying families and marriages; to whom Tertullian responded that the Phrygian spiritual leader is opposed to second marriage only, not the idea of marital life itself.

Now back in the AoTh, Thecla does abandon her pagan fiancé remaining "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" as also described in the mystery of the Devine Economy in the Ephesians (5, 27) in order however to substantiate the relation between the sexes within marriage. At the same time, apart from ascetism and virginity, **highly favored is** in the AoTh the pious familia of Onesiphorus.

The aforementioned give rise to the following conclusions concerning the high popularity of the AoTh which would be except the literary genre in use, (1) the **indirect-not evident** decline from orthodoxy and (2) the supplementation of the information retrieved by the Acts of the Apostles and 2 Timothy (the opening and the final books of the Epistles corpus respectively). Possibly, the Acts could help us identify the origins of the "feminist" inspirer of the AoTh. According to Acts 18 both **Apollon**, a conveyor of the Alexandrian tradition, a tradition not directly at least represented in the NT Canon, and **twelve disciples of John the Baptist** possibly closely associated with the periodic ascetic groups behind the Q Sayings Gospel (Luke 14, 20 [newlyweds!]), were operating in Ephesus. In Q a renouncement of all marital pleasures is for salvation to be gained. Moreover, it is quite surprising that this negative attitude (almost *hate!* Luke 14, 20) towards women and marriage is uniquely mentioned by Evangelist Luke who draws in detail the female "diakonia" (service Luke 8, 2-3) but not the fact that the disciples were accompanied during their periods by their spouses (1 Corinthians 9, 5). Notably, despite the catechesis of Apollon to orthodoxy by both **Priscilla and Aquila** (Acts 18, 26), Luke's standard pattern remains that a woman's appropriate behavior is silence (Martha and Mary, Luke 10, 41 although in Acts 21, 9 appear the virgin prophetesses daughters of Phillip).

Maybe these groups (Fuchs 2003, p. 8 footnote 18) insisted on a) the virginity of John the Baptist, b) the immaculate conception of Christ himself by a virgin, Theotokos, c) the virginity of Jesus himself, d) sayings of Christ in favor of the eunuchs by intention, e) Paul's sayings pro virginity. It is also interesting that the city of Ephesus has been associated directly with Theotokos herself (see Third Ecumenical Council [431 A.D.]), through legends claiming that the Mother of Jesus resided in Ephesus following a similar course with Jesus' beloved disciple, John (compare the virginity-metastasis to heavens of the two persons]).

At this point, it should be noted that in the 2nd A.D. ascetic attitudes prevailed within the Church. This resulted among other reasons the rising opposition to the extreme ethical loose movement of Nicolaites (with the “**Jezebel**” of Thyateira [Revelation 2, 20] at the forefront of the movement). They were dealt with in latter books of the NT Canon (Judas // 2 Peter, Revelation) while it is likely that Nicolaites were using Pauline sayings against Judeo-Christians and other Christian heretics, such as the “ascets” mentioned polemically in Epistle to the Collosians and 1 Timothy (4, 1. 3). Already in 1 Corinthians 6 and Romans 6 Paul seems to face a libertinistic misinterpretation of his antinomistic teaching. Such immoral extremes were definitely threatening all major gatherings of the Church, like the “agapae” feasts, feeding the anti-christian opposition’s allegations about secret orgies and oedipal mixes within the Christian ritual.

## 2. Artemis and Thecla

Another contributing factor regarding the high popularity of the cult of Saint Thecla was that the female Isapostle from Iconium offered to the oppressed female gender an alternative model to the pagan goddess Artemis also known as Diana. The short, dressed goddess with the bow has been a feminine ideal which since already in the Homeric era is identified with Penelope and Nausika (Elliger, 1978, p.60). Freedom from casual conformity, protection in birth and immortality (often associated with the underworld too, as depictions of her suggest) were some of her charismas to all her followers, especially the female ones. A most characteristic depiction of her figure can be found at the Philippi Acropolis where the deity is portrayed accompanied by nearly forty women who in total contrast to Artemis, are veiled and in conservative dressing carrying elements traditional elements of the familial household. In the epilogue of the AoTh (Chapter 44), the protagonist saint is considered by the natives to be a faithful priestess of Artemis with healing and exorcising powers. It should be noted that Thecla did not stay on the “traditional” path of subordination and submission to her mother’s will and bonds of marriage, although she eventually seems concerned about her house of origin and her widow “ancestor”. She preached and defied secular and ecclesiastical patriarchy and authority.

Thecla did not even hesitate to cut her hair and resist to the attempting rapist by tearing his garment apart and removing the chaplet from his head, both symbolic gestures of public humiliation (Chapter 26). Paul himself appears estranged to Thecla by saying like Abraham in Sarah’s case (Genesis 12, 17): ***I do know the woman that you are talking about, she is not mine.*** Having started her life as a itinerating foreigner-servant of God, settles down in a cave far away from her home-town where she stays for 72 (!) years. Such places were also very dear to the going round the earth Artemis.

In more detail the shared features with respect to Artemis, are the following:

- **Virginit**y: The goddess Artemis, patron deity of the city which later would host the Third Ecumenical Council, where Mariam the mother of Jesus would be dogmatically declared as Theotokos, was particularly associated with virginity (Achilles Tati
- us 6.21.2) whereas at the same time she was worshiped as the protector of birth (Λεχώ / Λοχεῖα or Σωδῖνα). The cult of the goddess used **the bee**, as a symbol for purity. The priesthood of her Parthenon, **the Essenes** also kept themselves pure from sexual attachments as well as the women venerating her. Furthermore her female servants were undergoing a purity test involving entering a cave (Achilles Tati
- us 8 [peak of the plot]). Note that the old lady at this time Thecla, is saved from rape by entering miraculously in a rock. In *the Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* Artemis of Ephesus defends virgin Leucippe been submitted, like Thecla, to several humiliations: “... the goddess Artemis stood before me in a dream and said “Wheep no more; thou shalt not die, **for I will be thy helper, but thou must remain a virgin**, until I deek thee as bride, and non-other than Clitophon shall be thy spouse” (Achilles Tati
- us, 4.1.4). Etymologically the name comes either from ἄρταμος (artamos = slaughter), or from ἄρκτος (arktos = bear) or from Artimous in Lydian (= daughter of Leto and sister of Apollo).
- And in the work of Xenophon *The Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes*, Artemis guarantees the fidelity of the heroine: «Ἀβροκόμη, πεπίστευκας ὅτι ἐὰν ἀπαλλαγῶ σοῦ, περὶ ἀνδρὸς ἔτι καὶ γάμου σκένομαι, ἥτις οὐδὲ ζήσομαι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἄνευ σοῦ; Ὡς ὀμνύω τέ σοι τὴν πάτριον ἡμῖν θεόν, τὴν μεγάλην Ἐφεσίων Ἄρτεμιν, καὶ ταύτην ἣν διανύομεν θάλατταν καὶ τὸν ἐπ’ ἀλλήλοις ἡμᾶς καλῶς ἐκμήναντα θεόν, ὡς ἐγὼ καὶ βραχὺ τι ἀποσπασθεῖσα σοῦ οὔτε ζήσομαι οὔτε τὸν ἥλιον ὄψομαι» (1.11.5).
- **Freedom from social conformity-male “monstrous” dominance**: Artemis, also called Potnia (= Mistress) of the beasts (*Iliad* 21.470) and *Lyco*/Λυκῶ/Λύκαινα (a deity that kills the wolves and protects the herds has been compassing the earth), just like Thecla in her early activities as an itinerating charismatic enthusiast. Eventually, as already noted, she settled down in a cave outside the city of Seleucia which (cave) like the desert was regarded to be a place for demons and darkness. On the contrary, there she manages to find refuge away from all urban idolatry. The beasts are already being succumbed by her spiritual personality. Due to Thecla defended by a female lion, all women of the city resist against male dominance and authority. In the end, not even the fury bulls send against her having first their genitals annealed (*Metaphor*) would harm her as not only water, but also fire take sides with her. It should be noted that the breasts of the cult statue of Aphrodite Tauropolous

(Sophocles, *Ajax* 1257; Euripides. *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 85.1454) could be bull genitals offered in the name of fertility.

In addition, we should not cast into oblivion the fact that the goddess of Ephesus, was initially one of the **eastern** chthonian deities of fertility later integrated by the Ionian colonists into their pantheon. The vulgar, with respect to Attic cultural standards, wooden cult statue of Artemis was considered to be a gift from the feminist Amazons<sup>1</sup>. Thecla is also associated with the east climates of Asia Minor.

- **Healing-Exorcism:** Just like the *Saviour sacred Artemis* / Σώτειρα, αγία Ἄρτεμις who saves from mortal dangers granting eternal life and immortality, Thecla's praying becomes for Falkonilla, daughter of Tryphaina, a pathway to eternal life (Chapter 29) while in the end her praying appears to have healing and exorcising power. As a result, the doctors of Seleucia move against her, just like the Ephesians silver craftsmen in Acts 19 against Paul, inciting the crowds to rape the Isapostle servant of God.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that an amulet of Artemis, the *Phosphorus goddess*, kept in a museum at Syracuse, identifies the goddess with the sacred light (also strongly linked with Thecla in the AoTh) and contains the short phrase “Δαμναμενηὶ δέχου θεοαυκέ ἀπαρχήν” (Duffy, 1994, p.189). The θεοαυκέ means **divine bravery** and alliterates both the name Thecla

(< κλέος Θεοῦ) and character of the female protagonist of the AoTh.

- **Universality:** The “mystery of piety” regarding Artemis was not limited within her sacred grove-paradise where her acheropoiotos (not made by man) palladium was located having gained popularity of global proportions. The Ephesian goddess' fame was present throughout the Mediterranean urban network: Neapolis, Samareia, Marseille, Rome (Aventine Hill), Augustodunum, France, Hemeroscopio o Dianio, Valencia, Spain, North Africa, the home of Tertullian (comp. Strabo, 4.1.4-8, Pausanias 4.31.8) could be taken as examples.

Spreading the cult was achieved also through the transporting of Ephesian virgins to the aforementioned urban centres. We should not overlook the possibility of Thecla herself becoming famous due to the successful conversion to Christianity of several of these female worshipers of Artemis operating all over the Roman *Mare nostrum* network.

## Conclusions

My reflections so far lead me to argue that the AoTh, whom the writer is likely to have some in common with the twelve Baptists and Apollos, owe their quick spread in such a short time all across the Mediterranean to the following facts:

1. The literary form used, romantic novel/romance captivating particularly the female population.
2. The fact that the texts fill voids and supplement the Pauline letters corpus and the Acts.
3. They provide an excellent alternative to the universally worshiped goddess Artemis.

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