



THE HOLY EMPRESS PULCHERIA IN LIGHT OF RECENT RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

As an image of virginity and a model of Augusta, Empress Pulcheria of Byzantium played a remarkable role in the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries, being a witness to the rejection of Nestorianism at the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431), and equally of Eutichianism (Monophysitism) at the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451) where she also participated. According to modern research, her feminine profile is complex, although the Church has kept a pious memory of her, dedicating two days of homage in the Synaxarion to her, on February 17, along with her husband, Emperor Marcian, and on September 10.

Keywords: *Pulcheria, Mother of God, Virgin, Nestorianism, Chalcedon*

INTRODUCTION

Aelia¹ Pulcheria (January 19, 399 – ca. July/September 10, 453), first child and eldest daughter of Emperor Arcadius and Empress Eudoxia, has remained in memory as a “guardian” of Emperor Theodosius II (402-450)², her brother, and a strong supporter of the Orthodox faith.³ Although too young to have known the ascetic Archbishop John Chrysostom

¹ “Aelia” is the name used by Byzantine empresses, as a tribute to Aelia Flavia Flacilla, the honored wife of Theodosius I.

² Until Pulcheria took over this role, regent was the “praetorian prefect, Anthemius, the university professor, Troilus the sophist, and the new archbishop, Atticus, who served as spiritual director and confessor to the imperial family.” (Cf. Nicholas P. Constanas, “Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.2 (1995), p. 171). Anthemius had contributed in quality of *comes sacrarum largitionum* (senior fiscal official) to the reinforcement of the relations with the Persian kings. Another close companion of the Sassanian king Yazdgerd I (399-420), eunuch Antiochus will become Theodosius II's pedagogue and guarantor of his succession to the throne, following the political agreement between Yazdgerd I and Arcadius. (Cf. Greatrex, Geoffrey, and Jonathan Bardill, “Antiochus the «Praepositus»: A Persian Eunuch at the Court of Theodosius II”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996), pp. 171-173).

³Ryan S. Swanson, in his Diss. *Aelia Pulcheria and Mary Theotokos: Fenestra et Speculum* (Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 2003), advances the idea that the promotion of Mariology during the first half of the fifth century is directly related to Augusta Pulcheria's intention to extend her own fame and authority, in the context of a society very impressionable by religious aspects. We think that things should be perceived in a bit more nuanced manner, religion representing a constant of the Byzantine world, even for the imperial family, an evident fact in Pulcheria's life, who embraces virginity from an early age. Her choice needs to be perceived rather in relation to the recommendations made to her by Archbishop Atticus, author of a treaty on faith and virginity dedicated to Pulcheria and her sisters. See: Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1982, pp. 138-139.



(exiled twice at the pressures of Eudoxia and of the accomplice council led by Theophilus of Alexandria, in 403; and, definitively, in 404 A.D.),⁴ except probably that she must have known his appreciated writings, the young child who became motherless when she was just five and also fatherless at the age of just ten. She grew in an atmosphere still impregnated by the ascetic spirit promoted by the memorable aristocratic deaconess Olympiada, her aunt, who was exiled in Nicomedia for the “crime” of having supported the losing cause of the Archbishop of Constantinople.

Her responsibility as elder sister drew a few lines of her personality, which were going to characterize her whole life: maturity in thinking, power of decision and of pursuing a cause, preoccupation to rise to the level of being worthy of imperial leadership (both as a regent from the age of 15, and as a trainer of her brother, designated as Augustus from the age of 8-9 months),⁵ and also piety to the Saviour Christ and His Mother. To what extent her holding of power and her manifestation of her influence affected her good intentions, this is a matter on which historians continue to debate. However, lately, a more positive reception of the Augusta⁶ has been taking shape, in unison with the favourable image transmitted to posterity through the historian Sozomen⁷ and the memory of the Church.

1. THE VOW OF VIRGINITY – A GUARANTEE FOR STABILITY OF THE EMPIRE OR A RELIGIOUS CHOICE?

The premature death of her mother, in the aftermath of two extrauterine pregnancies, the latter, fatal,⁸ must have left in Pulcheria’s memory at least a shadow of concern regarding the risk that a descendant of Eve’s can expose herself to, being destined, in the post-Edenic conditions, to give birth in pain. Maybe also this detail, unexplored by historians, exerted a certain influence when the young regent decided to take a public vow of virginity, to which she exhorted her younger sisters, Arcadia and Marina, and convinced them to adhere to it as well. Certainly, primordial in her taking of this decision may have been the wise desire to eliminate any internal danger to the safety of the reign of her brother, Theodosius II, and, according to some historians, her own desideratum of leading herself with a strong hand, from the shadow of regency and of the status of pedagogue-sister, the imperial affairs, which were quite demanding and hard to manage by her brother. However, an even more credible and stronger motivation in maintaining this difficult trajectory of virginity should also be

⁴ The rewriting of his name in diptychs (423 A.D.) and the bringing of his holy relics to Constantinople to be honoured properly (438), were going to be two welcome and necessary stages both in the rehabilitation of the memory of his person accused of heresy (Origenism), and for re-establishing the communion with the *Joannites*, the Christians who had remained faithful to the martyr-archbishop.

⁵ Geoffrey Greatrex and Jonathan Bardill, “Antiochus the «Praepositus»...”, p. 172.

⁶ Pulcheria was raised to this imperial rank in July 414, at the age of 15.

⁷ Sozomen IX, I, p. 419: “This princess was not yet fifteen years of age, but had received a mind most wise and divine above her years. (...) After quietly resuming the care of the state, she governed the Roman empire excellently and with great orderliness; she concerted her measures so well that the affairs to be carried out were quickly decreed and completed. She was able to write and to converse with perfect accuracy in the Greek and Latin languages. (...) She provided zealously and wisely that religion might not be endangered by the innovation of spurious dogmas. That new heresies have not prevailed in our times, we shall find to be due especially to her, as we shall subsequently see. With how much fear she worshipped God, it would take long for any one to say; and how many houses of prayer she built magnificently, and how many hostels and monastic communities she established, the arrangement for the expenses for their perpetual support, and the provision for the inmates.”

⁸ Jennifer Barry, “Diagnosing Heresy: Ps.-Martyrius’s Funerary Speech for John Chrysostom”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24.3 (2016), p. 400.



considered:⁹ the profound religious formation of Pulcheria,¹⁰ her sincere belief in Christ, the man-God Saviour, and in the Virgin Mary, His Mother, mother of all orphans and feminine representative of virginity by excellence.

What the historical sources transmit is the fact that Pulcheria permanently manifested a special piety to the cult of the Mother of the Lord, in a marked development after the Great Council of Nicaea (325), which had consecrated her major contribution to the humanization of the Logos consubstantial with the Father, following the virginal conception “of the Holy Spirit”. We also find out that the Augusta, since her adolescence in the imperial palace, promoted a quasi-monastic manner of living by taking on, along with virginity (together with her sisters), the practice of the virtues of philanthropy, prayer, and the actions of support for the edification of places of worship. The young emperor, in his turn, was educated in a spirit of respect and piety to the Shepherds of the Church and, although of a less determined nature, he was trained to have sufficiently developed preoccupations to maintain the true faith and to generalize it in the capital and the Empire.

Although Pulcheria’s authoritarian position was going to undergo a gradual diminution, following the tensions emerged after her brother’s marriage with the young lady of simple origins, yet erudite and quite full of personality, Athenais (future Eudochia, through Baptism and the reception of the dignity of Augusta),¹¹ this did not decrease the sister-Augusta’s piety and zeal toward honouring the Theotokos.

A day of celebration had already been established immediately after that of the Birth of the Lord, through which the virgins were celebrating, on December 26, Mary, the Virgin worthy to give birth, with human body, to the Son of God.¹² The young Augusta’s amazement was great (according to others, frustration or shock), when Nestorius, the new Archbishop of Constantinople formed at the literal exegetic school of Antioch, expressed an open reservation regarding the cult of Mary and the privileges claimed by the Augusta-Virgin concerning her communing along with the clergy and the emperor.¹³ What at first had looked

⁹ For a political motivation of the vote of virginity in the case of Pulcheria and her sisters, see: Geoffrey Greatrex and Jonathan Bardill, “Antiochus the «Praepositus...”, pp. 191-193.

¹⁰ After the terrifying death of Empress Eudoxia, the attitude of the Imperial Court toward Saint John Chrysostom changed, as a reparative form being brought back to the Court persons from Saint John’s entourage, one of them being Salvina who would function along with a niece of Olimpyada’s, Olympia, as “adoptive mother” and spiritual guide for Pulcheria and her sisters. Cf. Judith Mary Foster, *Giving birth to God: the virgin empress Pulcheria and imitation of Mary in early Christian Greek and Syriac traditions*, Diss., Concordia University, 2008, p. 47, where he cites the historians Socrates 7.22 4-5; Soz. 9.1.10-11,3.1-2; Theod. *Hist eccl.* 5. 36.4: “At canonical hours day and night the emperor and his sisters came together to chant antiphons and to recite passages of Scripture learned by heart. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, and the young women, following the precepts of church fathers, gave up such vanities as cosmetics, luxurious apparel, and the usual idleness of aristocratic females, to devote themselves to time at the loom and other household occupations suitable for “admirable” women and especially on works of charity, founding oratories, houses for the poor and destitute and monasteries and supporting inmates from their personal incomes.”

¹¹ For a reevaluation of Eudocia’s biography and intellectual profile, see the studies by Tatyana Alexandrova: “The Empress Athenais Eudocia: the Path to the Throne/ Императрица Афинаида-Евдокия: путь к трону.” *Проблемы истории, филологии, культуры* 1 (55) (2017), pp. 75-87”; “Eve, Helena, Eudocia... Pulcheria? Revisiting the Question of Intertextual Allusions in the Homeric Cento”, *Культура и текст* №3.34 (2018), pp. 185-195.

¹² The one credited with the introduction of this Marian feast is Atticus, St. John Chrysostom’s successor to the Archiepiscopal See of Constantinopol. See: Nicholas P. Constas, “Weaving the Body of God...”, p. 172.

¹³ Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*, Springer Nature, 2019, pp. 163-164.



like a personal problem, between the inconsiderate archbishop¹⁴ and the self-assured Augusta, was going to become a political-religious confrontation of ecumenical level and with provisions valid for the entire Church.

The Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, which took place in 431, was going to proclaim, although not without some reversals of situation,¹⁵ and amends needed to re-establish ecclesiastical peace,¹⁶ the unique quality of the Virgin Mary as *Theotokos*, as the one who gave birth to Emmanuel, the Only-Begotten embodied Son of God. It was a victory of the right-glorifying faith, but also a personal victory for Pulcheria, who, affirming to Nestorius about the Virgin that she gave birth to God, associated to virginity a distinct status among Christians, a position (almost) equal to that of the high-ranking clergy. This victory of *Orthodoxy* was due to a sum of factors, but all those involved admitted – at least formally – to the sister-Augusta, a power of influence on the emperor worthy of a true *basileia*.¹⁷

2. EMPRESS AND VIRGIN – TWO INCOMPATIBLE ATTRIBUTES?

The animosities between the two sisters-in-law from the imperial court were going to be propelled by the undesired appearance, in the entourage of the unsure and uncertain emperor, of the eunuch Crysaphius, an advisor with strong power of persuasion on Theodosius II, but also on his wife, Aelia Eudocia. What Bishop Nestorius had intended unsuccessfully in his too direct and inconsiderate manner, namely to reduce Pulcheria's influence on political matters and on her brother's decisions, this man, skilled, yet not without cruelty, was going to succeed almost fully. After having unsuccessfully tried to undermine the sister-Augusta's status by determining Eudocia to request from the emperor for herself the privileged place in the leadership of administrative imperial matters,¹⁸ Crysaphius did not shy away from suggesting to Theodosius II to go out and meet Pulcheria's desire to live in virginity, by making her join the rank of deaconess, a position which would have limited and closed almost entirely her access to the requirements of an affirmation on the political level.

¹⁴ Kathryn Chew, "Virgins and eunuchs: Pulcheria, politics and the death of Emperor Theodosius II", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* H. 2 (2006), pp. 217-218.

¹⁵ From possibly accused before Nestorius and the Emperor Theodosius II, for some administrative excesses and dogmatic inaccuracies (Cf. Paul Gavriluk, "Theopatheia: Nestorius's main charge against Cyril of Alexandria", *Scottish journal of theology* 56.2 (2003), pp. 190-207), the Archbishop of Alexandria, Cyril, will become president over the Council of Ephesus I (3rd Ecumenical Council, 431) where he will condemn Nestorius for the heresy of Dioprosopism. However, despite this advantage, the emperor initially rejects the Council members' decisions and condemns together the principal opponents: Nestorius, Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus. It is only a few months later (October), through supporters from the Imperial Court, that St. Cyril of Alexandria is freed again and returns victorious, Nestorius being condemned as heretic and deposed from the archiepiscopal see.

¹⁶ At the expressed demand of Emperor Theodosius II the dialogue between the Alexandrians (St. Cyril of Alexandria) and Antiochans (John of Antioch) continued, leading to a common formula of faith in the year 433.

¹⁷ In this sense we point to a series of letters of St. Cyril prior to the Council of Ephesus of 431 addressed to the Emperor's sisters (and personally to Augusta Pulcheria), and a letter of Pope Leo I to Pulcheria of the year 449 where she was being asked, again, to intervene to Emperor Theodosius II, with the confidence that the victory on Eutyches, the new heresiarch, depends very much on her (Cf. Joan M. Ferrante, "«Licet longinquis regionibus corpore separati»: Letters as a Link in and to the Middle Ages", *Speculum* 76.4 (2001), p. 881).

¹⁸ Eudocia's request of having her own *praepositus Augustae* was met with a refusal, in favor of Pulcheria's expertise. (Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses...*, p. 192)



However, the respect that the sister-Augusta had won toward herself and her inborn tact¹⁹ helped her overcome also this trap wrought by the shameless eunuch thirsty for power. Warned by Proclus, the new archbishop of the city, Pulcheria withdrew to a more peripheral area of the capital, avoiding in this way the fatal “meeting” with the Archbishop, who had been ordered to officiate her entry into a cone of grey or her definitive monastic withdrawal. Pulcheria’s withdrawal and patience did not remain unrewarded, as she filled her time expressing even more actively her piety to the Virgin Mary by the intensification of her support for the projects of edification of new places of worship dedicated to the protection of the Mother of God, the Empress and Lady of the world.²⁰

The accidental death of Theodosius II in 450 A.D. allowed Augusta Pulcheria to return in an authoritative position. The formal marriage with general Marcian, a good strategist and supporter absolutely necessary to reject the increasingly numerous assaults from the periphery of the Empire, secured her success and the position she had not hoped for, of Empress, which she had exerted until then rather indirectly or with great persuasive efforts. The elimination of uninvited and bold adversaries like Crysaphius, took place by itself, in the spirit of the Byzantine and Roman policy with tradition in such common matters.

Once more, Pulcheria was going to bring her support and contribution to the defence and proclamation of the true faith, this time taking part, in quality of imperial couple, along with her husband, in the final meeting of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.). This Council marked a historical moment in the affirmation of the union without confusion, without change, indivisible and inseparable, of the two natures, Divine and human, and the unique divine-human hypostasis of the embodied Son of God. The ovations of the Council members and participants confirmed to Pulcheria, at the highest level, the authority, providential role, and virtue conferred by maintaining virginity also “after marriage”. Her comparison with Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great, was going to be a strong argument in her future canonization, precipitated by Pulcheria’s relatively unexpected passage into eternity just two years later, at the age of 54.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the two Ecumenical Councils that she actively witnessed, assured for Pulcheria an indelible place in memory, and especially that of the Church. Her pure image, of moral authority and as an inspired leader, remained a model difficult to attain and zealously desired by the ladies who succeeded her at the imperial court over the centuries.

¹⁹ Wendy Mayer, in *De imperatoribus Romanis. An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors*, expresses the opinion of Pulcheria’s continued participation in religious matters, inherited from her mother: “It is also probable that, through establishing a model for the engagement of imperial women of the east at a high level in the ecclesiastical sphere, she paved the way for her daughter, Pulcheria.”

²⁰ K. A. Zafeiris, *The Synopsis Chronicle and its place in the Byzantine Chronicle tradition: its sources (Creation–1081 CE)*, D.Phil. Univ. St. Andrews, 2007, p. 104; Maria Vaiou, “Byzantine churches built in Constantinople by the Theodosian dynasty (379–457)”, *Journal of religious culture* 283 (2021), pp. 9-38. The following places of worship are known to have been edified by Queen Pulcheria: St. Lawrence at *Pulcherianai*; St. Stephen in *Zeugma* (Unkapani) or *Konsta*; Church and monastery of *Theotokos ton Hodegon*, Oratory of St. Stephen in the palace of *Daphne*; Forty martyrs; *Theotokos Chalkoprataia* (‘Our Lady in the Coppermarket’); St. Mary of the *Blachernae* or the *Hagiasma* of the *Blachernaei*. Other churches built together with her husband, Emperor Marcian: St. Menas in *Acropolis*, Church and monastery of St. Mocius; St. Isaias.



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