

What Hath Athens to Do with Jerusalem? The Homeric Centos of Aelia Eudocia

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Tertullian posed the question *What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?* in fear of pagan influence on Christian thought. Of the many possible responses to Tertullian's question, perhaps the best answer lies not in rhetorical rebuttal, but in a biography. Aelia Eudocia Augusta, née Athenais in honor of her native Athens, is known as the pagan who converted to Christianity upon her marriage to the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II. Her travels spanned from Athens to Constantinople to Jerusalem; born in the birthplace of Greek philosophy, she finished her life in the birthplace of Christianity. Thus, geography and her lifespan linked the two cities Tertullian felt to be in conflict. But more importantly, her religious, literary, and philosophical ideas brought Athens and Jerusalem into even closer conversation.

Eudocia's father was a philosopher, Leontios, who had given her a brilliant education. In addition to studying philosophy, she was brought up on the verses of Homer and Pindar and knew large portions by heart. Her father prophesied that she had a great destiny, so he left her little in his will. This, coupled with her brothers leaving her nearly destitute, propelled her to seek redress at the court of Pulcheria, sister to the emperor Theodosius II. Impressed by her courage and rhetorical abilities, Pulcheria, a vowed virgin who had been on a bride hunt for her less politically adept brother, introduced Eudocia to both Theodosius and the Christian faith. Eudocia's conversion, marriage, and new political power seemed to fulfill the great destiny her father prophesied. But popularity combined with politics can prove a double-edged sword. Jealousy and rivalry led to exile for Eudocia.

Yet, throughout her life, she straddled the milieux of Athens and Jerusalem, of pagans and Christians, with seemingly effortless grace. She never relinquished her faith or her Greek literary heritage. Her separation from Theodosius did not reverse her conversion, just as her conversion had not altered her profound love of Homer. During her time in Constantinople, she had already begun composing verses. In Antioch, where she had supervised building projects, she addressed the crowds professing to be "of their birth and blood," a citation from Homer linking her with their Greek tradition. But it was during her exile in Jerusalem that she composed her greatest surviving work—and the greatest proof of a harmony between pagan and Christian traditions—her Homeric centos:

Hear, innumerable tribes of dwellers among men,
as many mortals as now eat bread upon the earth
and as many as dwell near both the dawn and the sun
and as many as dwell behind the murky gloom of the underworld
so that I may say the things that my soul in my breast urges me
that you may recognize a God as well as a Man.

Each line in the above passage was taken from either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, stitched together into a seamless whole—a new story woven out of the old. That is the *cento* genre, which complemented the "patchwork" of Eudocia's own life. It is a Christian epic focusing on the miracles and passion of Christ as found in the Gospels, drawn entirely from Homeric lines. Eudocia took inspiration from an unfinished cento poem by a bishop named Patricius, which she revised and completed, creating the lengthiest and most artistically dazzling Christian cento ever composed. Without compromising either the beauty of Homer's verse or the eternal truths of the Gospel, Eudocia allowed the flavor of the former to spill into the latter. As lines taken from Homer inevitably conjure images of their original scenes for the reader, a particularly adept centonist makes the most of the analogies. For example, to portray Christ as the sacrificial ram, Eudocia pulls two lines from

the *Iliad* and one from the *Odyssey*. In each, Christ is associated with Odysseus: first in Odysseus' likeness to a ram noticed by Priam from the walls of Troy (*Iliad* 3.197-98) and then as the ram Odysseus uses for cover to escape the Cyclops in *Odyssey* 9.432. The man/ram duality found in the Homeric texts cloaks the God/Man duality of the Christian *cento*. In fact, the *Odyssey* 9.432 line may be intended as an indirect reference to the Incarnation: as Odysseus hid himself under the ram, so God was enveloped in the body of a man. Even the last line of the poem cited above, "that you may recognize a God as well as a Man" (*Iliad* 5.128), has been variously translated as "a man and a God" (Rey 1998) and "him who is God and man" (Sowers 2020) to reflect the duality of Christ. The Homeric line refers to the supernatural ability Athena has just bestowed upon Diomedes to discern the presence of immortals on the field from mere men. In any case, it seems that Eudocia had such a duality in mind, especially given the then-current Monophysite controversy, the belief that Christ's humanity was fully deified. It is noteworthy that Eudocia herself wrestled with Monophysite ideas in her own faith before ultimately dismissing them. Thus, Eudocia's *cento* blends not only the layers of duality present in the Homeric epics, but also in Christian belief. Each thread is seamlessly interwoven, recognizable to each of the "innumerable tribes" she addresses, yet enjoyable even to the lay reader as a compelling poetic narrative of Christ. This is the beauty and complexity of the *cento*.

The *cento* genre itself receives its name from the Greek word κέντρον, represented variously as *a needle* or *prick*, thus tying textiles to the art of stitching texts. The word κέντρον also appears in the Koine of the New Testament in the conversion of Paul. The freeborn Roman citizen, student of Greek, Pharisee of Pharisees, and then persecutor of Christians was blinded by a heavenly light and heard the voice of God saying, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: *it is* hard for thee to kick against the *pricks* (κέντρα)" (Acts 9:5). Thus, it is a splendid linguistic *tour de force* that the "pricks" (κέντρα) that pushed Paul, who was cosmopolitan and highly educated, into conversion and a prolific theological career should also be, in Greek, the name of the genre (κέντρον) used in the prolific career of the cosmopolitan and highly educated Eudocia. As the student of Gamaliel could beckon to the acolytes of the "unknown God" or quote "what our own poets say," so Leontios' student Eudocia could depict her God in the language of the old poets being of their race and blood, whether in Athens or Jerusalem.