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Citation

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Off the Page and Beyond Antiquity: Ancient Romance in Medieval Byzantine Silver¹

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The ancient novel possesses a well-known afterlife in medieval Byzantine literature.² Yet the impact of the ancient and medieval novels on works of art has been less extensively explored.³ This paper considers romance themes in middle Byzantine artistic production, specifically in a domestic censer now preserved in the treasury of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice (Fig. 1).⁴

The object does not depict a specific narrative from a single ancient or medieval novel. Rather, it displays an iconographic program that resonates with themes prevalent in the Byzantine romances: the couples travel to foreign lands and endure separation, mistaken identity, physical suffering, and apparent death before being reunited and bound in matrimony. To varying degrees, the novels include erotic scenes and often depict characters overcome by emotional and sexual inspiration. Much like the medieval Greek

¹ This text closely follows the oral version of the paper presented at 'Crossroads in the Ancient Novel: Spaces, Frontiers, Intersections, Fourth International Conference on the Ancient Novel', Lisbon, 2008. It represents a small part of an in-progress study of the San Marco censer, in which I explore the object's place in Byzantine secular culture at the convergence of multiple artistic and textual traditions, including the classical, Islamic, and western medieval. This research will eventually contribute to a book-length study on female sexuality and morality in middle Byzantine art and society.

² On the Byzantine novel, see Beaton 1996; Agapitos and Smith 1992; Agapitos and Reinsch 2000.

³ This is no doubt in part because none of the extant copies of middle Byzantine romances preserve illuminations. A copy of the twelfth-century romance *Dosikles and Rhodanthe* was purportedly illustrated by the son of the author, Theodore Prodromos, as attested in a dedicatory inscription found in a fourteenth-century copy of the manuscript (Jeffreys 1998, 196-197, n. 13). This raises the possibility that illustrated romances may have originally provided a direct visual connection between literary and visual *topoi*.

⁴ For excellent images of the censer with views of all sides, see Hahnloser 1971, cat. no. 109, pl. 78-80.



Fig. 1 Incense Burner in the form of a building, Byzantine, twelfth century, gilded silver, 36 by 30 cm. Treasury of San Marco, Venice, Italy. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

novels, the San Marco censer projects antique *topoi* in a particularly Byzantine way.

The object takes the form of a miniature building, and a pair of doors provides access to an interior chamber in which incense was burned (Fig. 1). The domes and peaks are perforated to allow scented smoke to escape. The object is a rare survival of a domestic implement used to spread sweet smells throughout the home.⁵ It is fabricated from gilded silver, and this luxurious material attests to its production and use at an elite level of Byzantine society. The object is relatively large, measuring 36 by 30 cm (c. 14 by 12 in), and it is affixed with handles that allow it to be moved with ease. The censer is typically dated to the twelfth century and is associated with the court of the Komnenian dynasty, the same ruling house under which the four preserved middle Byzantine novels were produced.⁶ The chronology of these novels is debated, but emerging consensus dates the group to ca. 1130 to 1140, and I would place the San Marco censer in this mid-twelfth-century timeframe as well.⁷

At a subsequent date, probably after its arrival in Venice, the censer was transformed into a reliquary, and at this point crosses were added to the tops of the peaks and domes.⁸ But these Christian symbols were not part of the initial design. Rather, its original iconographic program was entirely secular, displaying a predominantly classicizing visual vocabulary. Around the lower walls, a series of reliefs depict real and fantastic animals as well as human figures. On one side, a female siren plays a flute and serenades her male companion. Other panels show Eros hiding in a basket and a man gesturing imploringly toward a female companion. Next to these vignettes appears a single centaur, who raises a shield and wields a weapon as he charges a rear-

⁵ There was a variety of motivations for burning incense in the home, from practical concerns, like warding off bugs and promoting health through good smells, to more recreational purposes such as creating a welcoming and luxurious environment for guests or a relaxing atmosphere for amorous couples. On the use of incense in the early Byzantine domestic sphere, see Caseau 1994, 117-133.

⁶ The four Byzantine romances of the twelfth century are: *Hysmine and Hysminias* by Eustathios Makrembolites (prose); *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* by Theodore Prodromos (verse); *Drosilla and Charikles* by Niketas Eugeneianos (verse); and *Aristandros and Kallithea* by Constantine Manasses (verse; preserved only in fragments). Regarding the audience for the twelfth-century novels, see Jeffreys 1998. On literary culture of the Komnenian court more broadly, see Mullet 1984; Magdalino 1993, 336-356.

⁷ On the possible date and relative chronologies of the novels, see MacAlister 1991.

⁸ Regarding the provenance of the censer, see Ioli Kalavrezou, 'Incense Burner in the Shape of a Domed Building', in: Evans 1996, cat. no. 176, 250-251, with additional bibliography.

ing lion on the panel around the corner. On the doors at the front of the building is depicted another male/female pair (Fig. 1), in this instance two personifications. The man at the left is inscribed *ΑΝΔΡΙΑ* (Courage) and is clothed in archaizing military attire, including a Phrygian cap. The woman at the right is identified as *Η ΦΡΟΝΕΣΙΣ* (Prudence or Intelligence) and wears a distinctive double-skirted dress. Both figures are nimbed.

The secular character of this object has long been recognized. Over fifty years ago, André Grabar interpreted the building to be a palace pavilion.⁹ More recently scholars, including Ioli Kalavrezou, suggest that the structure represents a garden kiosk.¹⁰ In separate forthcoming studies, Mabi Angar and Nicolette Trahoulia further expand interpretation of the object as a palace or garden pavilion.¹¹ Angar and Trahoulia also employ middle Byzantine romance literature to support their readings of the censer.

The present paper takes as its departure point the increasingly accepted interpretation of the censer as a secular pavilion, as well as the utility of the Byzantine novels for interpreting the object's program. In particular, I advocate identifying the building as garden architecture. Moving beyond this common ground, my discussion focuses on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and gardens in both the program of the censer and in the middle Byzantine novels. The censer displays an unusual prevalence of male/female pairs and affords women unusual prominence. As Anthony Littlewood and Charles Barber observe in separate studies, the garden in the medieval Greek novels is a space closely tied to the feminine and to sexuality.¹² Littlewood further notes that the prominent role of garden settings distinguishes the medieval Greek romances from the ancient novels, indicating the particularly Byzantine character of this theme.¹³ Female protagonists are often encountered in gardens, and garden ekphraseis commonly follow descriptions of the heroine herself.¹⁴ The San Marco censer shows unusually numerous

⁹ Grabar 1951, 282-284.

¹⁰ Kalavrezou, 'Incense Burner', in: Evans 1996, 251. Regarding the category of pleasure—as opposed to functional—gardens in Byzantium, see Littlewood 2002, 13.

¹¹ Trahoulia 2006, 102. I thank Mabi Angar for discussions regarding her in-progress work on the San Marco Censer. At the time that this paper was written, her publications (Angar 2008 and Angar 2009), were not yet available.

¹² Littlewood 1979, 97-99 and 103-107; Barber 1992; Jouanno 2006. Also see Littlewood 2008, 201. On Byzantine garden culture more generally, see Littlewood et al. 2002.

¹³ Littlewood 1979, 95-97. The prevalence of gardens in the Byzantine romances may have been instigated in part by shifting social dynamics in Byzantium, specifically the rise of powerful families in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and their establishment of private gardens. Wolschke-Bulmahn 2002, 8.

¹⁴ Littlewood 1979, 98-100.

female figures and female/male pairs: two sirens; two personifications; and an amorous couple in which the man gestures imploringly to an aloof female partner. I believe these heterosexual pairings, along with the prevalence of fantastical and wild animals, connote themes woven throughout the middle Byzantine romances, including the threat of unbridled passion and the protagonists' resistance to sexual temptation.¹⁵

In what follows, I focus my discussion on one of the four twelfth-century Greek novels, *Hysmine and Hysminias* by Eustathios (or Eumathios) Makrembolites.¹⁶ This text provides especially strong and intriguing parallels to themes of female allure and heterosexual erotic tension found in the program of the censer. I first offer an overview of iconographic and thematic connections between the San Marco censer and Byzantine novels, focussing on the classicizing and eroticizing elements of both the visual and literary traditions. Next I consider the program's connection to the gendered conception of gardens in the medieval Greek romances and the question of sexual morality often raised in these books. I posit a specific social context for the censer's use and discuss the active viewing and ethical contemplation that I believe the object inspired. Finally I raise the possibility of a Komnenian cultural practice of engaged discourse about the novels and the spurring of such debate by objects like the censer. The following discussion is of particular relevance to the history of middle Byzantine secular art, which is generally less developed than the study of Byzantine religious art, in part because art historians have been at a loss to situate secular objects within Byzantine culture more broadly.¹⁷ Linking the San Marco censer to the medieval Greek novels facilitates a significantly richer cultural contextualization of this object.

Scholars of the middle Byzantine Greek romances have demonstrated that these books are characterized by classicizing qualities in both style and content, and this interest in antiquity has been related to a wider classicizing trend in Komnenian culture of the mid- to late twelfth century.¹⁸ Similarly, the San Marco censer reveals an interest in the form and content of antique *visual* culture. One of the key connections in this respect is found in the de-

¹⁵ The heterosexual pairs may also relate to an increased concern for marriage mounting in Byzantium during the eleventh and twelfth centuries that Elizabeth Jeffreys (1998, 195–199) suggests as one of the motivating social factors behind the resurgence of interest in the literary genre of the novel in twelfth-century Byzantium.

¹⁶ Hercher 1859, 159–286; Nilsson 2001.

¹⁷ See, however, the recent study Maguire and Maguire 2007.

¹⁸ Regarding the relation of *Hysmine and Hysminias* to ancient literary models, see Alexiou 1977; Nilsson 2001.

piction of Eros, the god of love, hiding in a basket. This motif derives ultimately from scenes of the punishment of Eros, in which Aphrodite chastises her troublesome son for his misbehaviour. The theme appears in narrative form on a floor mosaic of the so-called Hippolytus Hall in a sixth-century CE mansion excavated in Madaba (Jordan).¹⁹ Eros is spanked by Aphrodite with a shoe, and *erotes* dive into baskets as they attempt to avoid similar punishment. The motif appears elsewhere in middle Byzantine art, for example in the well-known Veroli casket, an eleventh-century ivory box depicting scenes of Greco-Roman myths in a highly classicizing style.²⁰ On two panels, *erotes* hide in baskets, again referring to the mischief instigated by Eros and his band.

Eros holds significance in relation to both the antique and medieval Greek novels because of the obvious theme of erotic love that is so much the focus of these stories. His enlarged size on the censer causes him to punctuate the visual program (Fig. 1, far right), demanding that the viewer privilege the motif. Eros makes a key appearance in *Hysmine and Hysminias*. In one of the early scenes of the novel (2,7-11), Hysminias and his friend, Kratisthenes, wander in the garden of Hysmine's father and admire the works of art on display there. They linger upon a particularly complex and unusual depiction of Eros, who is shown enthroned and surrounded by attendants like a king. The image of Eros leads Hysminias and Kratisthenes to ponder the power of the god and whether men are able to resist the forces of Eros, the so-called 'tyrant of love' (2,8). In this respect, the presence of Eros on the San Marco censer offers a significant link between the object and the decoration of a garden environment. On the censer, Eros takes shelter in a basket, indicating that he has already interfered in the affairs of men and is attempting to elude punishment; he has perhaps amorously inspired the couple in the immediately adjacent panel, or at least the male figure of this pair, who gestures passionately as he entreats his comparatively passive female companion. Along with the other mythological figures depicted on the censer, including sirens and a centaur, Eros might evoke antique sculpture, which is known to have decorated actual Byzantine pleasure gardens.²¹ Eros later

¹⁹ Piccirillo 1993, 51-56 and 66.

²⁰ Anthony Cutler, 'The Veroli Casket', in: Evans 1996, cat. no. 153, 230-231, with earlier bibliography.

²¹ Regarding the use of antique statues in late antique gardens, see Wolschke-Bulmahn 2002, 9.

appears to Hysminias in a dream and binds the young man to Hysmine (3,1), whose amorous advances Hysminias had resisted until this point.²²

In the novel, Eros is described as a king, enthroned and surrounded by courtiers (2,7 and 3,1).²³ This represents an unusually mature and authoritative form of the god, quite different from his childlike appearance on the censer. In this respect, the artistic representation shows a greater fidelity to antique (or late antique) visual types than the contemporary literary model of the medieval novel. Indeed the censer depicts Eros in a distinctly less powerful position, hiding to avoid punishment. This is a point to which we will return later.

On the San Marco censer, the motif of Eros appears next to a vignette of a man extending his hands in an imploring gesture toward a woman who faces him but does not return his advances. The pair perhaps refers to the sufferings that Eros can inflict on lovers, especially those whose affections are not reciprocated. Again, while the theme of unrequited love is consistent between text and object, the gender of the figures is here switched: in the novel, it is the male protagonist, Hysminias, who at first fails to respond to Hysmine's initial advances, while in the censer it is the female figure who rejects her male companion. However, in this respect, Hysmine is very much the exception to the rule, for it is typically the heroines of the middle Byzantine romances who are the more reluctant to succumb to erotic temptation. In fact later in the story, the tables are turned, and Hysmine herself rebuffs Hysminias' amorous entreaties.

Another resonance between the San Marco censer and the garden described in *Hysmine and Hysminias* is the depiction of personified virtues. The same mural in Hysmine's father's garden that depicts Eros also represents personifications of Courage, Prudence (Sophrosyne), Chastity, and Justice (2,2-6).²⁴ In the novel, however, all four are female figures while on the San Marco censer Courage is male. The heterosexual pairing of Courage and Prudence distinguishes these personifications from those noted in the text. Still, their male-female identity parallels the amorous hero and heroine of the novel. In this respect the personifications can be understood to

²² Dreams or revelations of Eros commonly take place in gardens, and gardens are typical locales for subsequent scenes of lovemaking, as in the fourteenth-century Byzantine novel *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe*. For analysis of Hysmine's dreams, see Nilsson 2001, 103-110.

²³ Magdalino 1992.

²⁴ Jeffreys 2005, 316. Male personifications of the months are also depicted in the mural (4,5-18).

embody not only ideal qualities of good sense and courage, but also the brave and prudent protagonists themselves.

The male gender of Courage is somewhat unusual, but finds an important parallel in the canon table from a twelfth-century Byzantine Gospel book, in which Courage, a man, and Prudence, a woman, stand like statues atop columns.²⁵ The two figures are the first in a series of 18 personifications, which, as Nancy Ševčenko observes, begin with the so-called secular or imperial virtues including Prudence, Courage, Justice, and Truth, and then transition into the so-called monastic virtues including the more distinctly Christian and spiritual values of Faith, Hope, and Simplicity.²⁶ The figures in both the manuscript and the censer are rendered in strikingly similar terms as regards their dress, postures, and gestures. The vegetal designs of the headpiece above the figures in the manuscript evoke a garden setting, as does the fountain at the top from which two foxes drink. This manuscript supports a twelfth-century date for the censer and bespeaks a broader interest in personified virtues during this era. The comparison initiates an inter-visual link between sacred and secular objects, indicating that concern for exemplary behavior was not limited to the religious sphere. Rather, ethical comportment could also be discoursed upon in secular texts, like the medieval novels, and their visual reflections, like the San Marco censer. This potential circulation of moralizing values between secular and sacred objects and texts is extremely important, and one that has not been significantly emphasized to date.²⁷

The moral domain that the censer addresses is, of course, love and desire, as conveyed through the important position afforded to Eros as well as the prevalence of male/female pairs. Through attention to heterosexual groupings, the program establishes a distinctly amorous theme. Interestingly, female figures are afforded a high degree of agency. The female siren plays a musical instrument to enthrall the male siren, and the woman rejects the advances of her insistent companion. Even the personification of Prudence stands as an equal to her counterpart, Courage. In the profoundly patriarchal, even misogynist culture of medieval Byzantium, women wielded power rarely, in limited situations, and to a minimal degree.²⁸ Yet the imaginary realm of the novel offered leeway for alternate female types, who operated

²⁵ Riddle 1984, 25.

²⁶ Ševčenko 2001, 97. Also see Jeffreys 2005, 309-323.

²⁷ This point is explored extensively in my in-progress book on female sexuality and morality in Byzantium.

²⁸ Regarding the role of women in middle Byzantine society, see the recent collection of essays Garland 2006.

outside the normal proscriptions of Byzantine society.²⁹ This possibility is acted out in the novels: Hysmine behaves in an entirely immodest manner toward Hysminias when they first meet, pressing her hand against his when she offers him wine at a banquet and caressing and kissing his feet when she washes them as a gesture of hospitality (1,12).

In the Byzantine romances, the garden becomes a space for exceptional sexual freedom where couples kiss and caress. Later in the story, after recognizing the mutuality of their affections, Hysmine and Hysminias meet in Hysmine's father's garden and express their love with kisses and embraces, but the fire of their passion is quenched by an attendant who calls for Hysmine (4,21-23). It is not at all surprising that the garden, which has already been designated as the domain of King Eros in an earlier passage of the novel, should now be the setting of the lovers' attempted tryst. Indeed scholars suggest that the natural, untamed character of the garden milieu might have prompted the loosening of social conventions.³⁰ Having experienced the frustrations of interrupted love in reality, Hysminias gains erotic satisfaction later that evening in a dream. This infamous narrative sequence is as a rare instance of Byzantine erotica; a key moment describes the hero, Hysminias, sucking the breasts of the heroine, Hysmine, as they make love in a bath (5,1).

In the censer, the female siren, who seduces her male companion with sweet music, may refer metaphorically to the sexual agency and erotic desires that any well-informed viewer would know to lurk within the poised female figures in the other panels. Indeed one of the male figures has clearly been conquered by the powers of his female counterpart, assuming an imploring, subservient pose in relation to her. When in use, the censer would have glowed red from the smouldering embers within, recalling for the viewer the burning desires that the protagonists of the romances so often endured. This is not, however, to suggest that the San Marco censer ultimately subverts Byzantine conventions of sexual power dynamics. If the wild animals decorating the panels of the pavilion are understood as metaphors for unruly primal passion, it is instructive that only one of these beasts—a lion—rears up in attack, and this aggressive animal is met by a powerful centaur, whose equally wild force promises to subdue the beast.

According to Corinne Jouanno, the medieval Greek novels ultimately maintain a moral code that consistently realigns itself with Byzantine social

²⁹ Jouanno 2006. On the topic of Byzantine sexual mores, also see James 1999.

³⁰ Littlewood 1979, 100; Barber 1992.

norms.³¹ Although Hysmine is initially brazen, she soon reforms herself, and ultimately preserves her virginity until marriage, a feat sustained by all the heroines of the middle Byzantine novels. Throughout the romances, Byzantine female protagonists generally show consistent modesty, reserve, and chastity. Indeed we might at first suspect that the couple at the doorway of the censer is about to pass over the threshold of the building and indulge their desire within the pavilion; but the attitudes revealed in the Byzantine novels suggest that instead these figures represent an alternate ideal, one that Lynda Garland epitomizes in the phrase 'be amorous, but be chaste'.³² Courage and Prudence exemplify the qualities that the couple must possess in order to withstand the temptation to enter the pavilion where physical satisfaction would be gained, but virtue would be lost. Their steadfastness is mirrored by the lion and griffin that flank them. Unlike the rearing lion in the other side panel, these beasts do not threaten to attack, perhaps indicating that the male and female figures at the door have tamed their own wild desire. In the Byzantine romances, despite the fire of passion that burns within their souls, male and especially female protagonists preserve their virginity until marriage.

Nicolette Trahoulia rightly emphasizes the erotic character of the San Marco censer's program as well as the aphrodisiacal properties of the aromatic materials that were burned within it, suggesting that these amorous associations qualified the container for use as a bedroom furnishing and perhaps a wedding gift.³³ Yet the bedroom was not the only realm of the medieval home in which eroticism was enjoyed. The twelfth-century canonist, Theodore Balsamon, criticized elite Byzantines who decorated their homes with scenes of Eros and his mischievous deeds, thereby attesting to the fact that such motifs were found in relatively public spaces of the household, where a visitor might see them. Balsamon describes these images as available in great number and in many forms, 'on panels and on walls and in other media', including 'paintings (even gilded ones)...[and] human forms made of stucco'.³⁴ He warns that these dangerous images should be avoided or destroyed because they spur viewers' carnal desires. No doubt Balsamon would have found similar fault with the San Marco censer's program. Still, his commentary indicates that wealthy Byzantines did enjoy these motifs and

³¹ Jouanno 2006.

³² Garland 1990.

³³ Trahoulia 2006.

³⁴ Mango 1972, 234; Rhalles 1852, 545-546.

chose to decorate even relatively public spaces of the home with exactly this kind of erotic imagery.

Their motivations for doing so need not have been limited to an interest in exciting the sexual desires of their houseguests. While Balsamon saw in the images of *erotes* only morally perilous temptations, an educated Byzantine viewer, familiar with the literary tradition of the medieval Greek novel, might instead have seen in the San Marco censer an elite, if not erudite, reflection on the moral lessons of these romantic tales. The Byzantine novels not only entertained their readers, the books contain exemplars for proper comportment, foremost the necessity to maintain the chastity and honor of one's beloved until marriage, to remain courageous and prudent in the face of danger and temptation.

Some of the protagonists in the novels provide a model for exactly the sort of interpretative response that the San Marco censer and similar works of art would have demanded. As already noted, Hysminias and his friend Kratisthenes engage in an extended debate about the pleasures and perils of love, using the murals of Hysmine's father's garden as a departure point for their discussion (2,7-11). In this regard the characters demonstrate the interactive potential of an object like the San Marco censer, which was similarly suited for the Byzantine viewer's reflections on the virtues and vices of love. But while the murals in the novel emphasize the unmatched power of Eros as a despotic king, the censer suggests that Eros is by no means invincible, depicting him instead as a mischievous, yet cowardly child. In this respect, the message of the visual program diverges from that of the novel and ultimately insists on the triumph of human virtue over the temptations of Eros.

Previous interpretation of the San Marco censer emphasizes the private character of its imagery and themes. In contrast, I believe the object is better understood as one of relatively public display in a domestic setting. Its program would have advertised the owner's social prestige through the quality of its materials and craftsmanship as well as the literate character of its decoration. In this respect, I see the censer as continuing the late antique culture of *paideia*, which Ruth Leader-Newby explores in relation to late Roman and early Byzantine works of art.³⁵ Leader-Newby argues that classicizing programs in mosaics, silver plate, and other works of art in the homes of the social elite of the late antique Roman-Byzantine Empire advertised the education, even erudition, of their owners and served as departure points for learned debate. Similarly, the San Marco censer could have communicated its owner's social standing and served as a stimulus for the collective discus-

³⁵ Leader-Newby 2004, esp. 123-171.

sion of the romance tales to which it alludes, foremost the question of female agency in amorous encounters and the power of virtues like Courage and Prudence to overcome the carnal temptations of Eros and the siren. This perspective raises appreciation for the object's highly interactive nature. Rather than a mere decoration, it invited the viewer's active engagement with its iconographic program and the narratives it recalled.

My interpretation of the San Marco censer is one of several recent studies which together argue that the object is productively understood through comparison with middle Byzantine romances produced for the Komnenian court during the twelfth century. By moving discussion of the ancient novel beyond the antique world and off the written page, we might better appreciate the dynamic and diffuse impact that the ancient romance exerted outside the confines of its own time and format. The censer is not a direct representation of a specific garden pavilion described in a single romance. Rather its iconography evokes concepts of the garden as a gendered space in which sexuality, particularly of women, challenged social norms that were nonetheless ultimately upheld through the virtuous courage and good sense of amorous protagonists. I believe the object was intended to be viewed as a site for the stimulating consideration of romance, eroticism, and morality, and as an invitation for its audience to arrive at their own resolution of the ethical conflicts raised by the object's program.

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