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Christians and Pagans in Roman Nea Paphos: Contextualizing the ‘House of Aion’ Mosaic

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“Rather than retreats from public life, however, these residences were the forum made private.”
—Peter Brown, on the late Roman villa¹

Since its chance discovery in 1983 at the site of ancient Nea Paphos, the “House of Aion” floor mosaic has both fascinated and perplexed scholars. Located in the dining room (*triclinium*) of a wealthy Roman villa, the pavement, which contains five remarkably preserved panels depicting famous scenes from Greco-Roman mythology, is simply stunning in its artistic quality and scope. Constructed during the fourth century CE, the floor is a reflection of the considerable prosperity of late Roman Cyprus and a window into the private world of a confident Mediterranean elite.²

Yet if the magnificence of the mosaic program has been conceded by all, its interpretation has proven more controversial. Although the scenes themselves are easily identifiable, being explicitly labeled by the artist, their meaning has been vigorously debated.³ Indeed, several prominent scholars, including the head excavator of the villa, W. A. Daszewski, have noticed an unsettling pattern in the layout of the panels.⁴ When read as part of a continuous sequence, the thematic content of these pagan scenes seems to mirror, in exact order, key scenes from the life of Jesus as depicted in the canonical Christian Gospels. Specifically, these scholars claim, one can discern, filtered through the formal and symbolic template of events from classical mythology, the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, the Visitation of the Magi, the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, and the Condemnation before Pilate.

Proponents of what I will broadly term the “Christian” interpretation of the mosaic range in their views, with the most radical opinion, voiced by Marek T. Olszewski, seeing it as an anti-Christian polemical piece, commissioned by a wealthy pagan to discredit the ascendant religion. Such a shocking interpretation has been resisted by those scholars who would instead situate the mosaic program firmly within the bounds of traditional pagan artistic themes, observing in the iconographic sequence instead allegorical messages concerning the fate of the human soul, the victory of cosmic order over nature, or a neo-Platonic process of apotheosis.⁵ Debate between these two broad camps has been raging ever since the 1980’s, and although compelling arguments have been advanced by both sides, no real interpretive “progress” has been made.

The fourth century CE in the Roman Empire was a period of intense religious competition and acute cultural self-examination.⁶ In the course of just one hundred years, Christianity went from being a persecuted sect to the official state religion of the empire, which, under Theodosius I (r. 379–395 CE) and his successors, even came to take punitive measures against traditional pagan cults. No longer inhabiting a world where they could rely on their status as either social hegemon or beleaguered minority, pagans and Christians were forced to come to terms with what made them distinct when both groups were placed on a competitive footing. Consequently, although Roman society had long been pluralistic, this pluralism gave way to a newfound agonism as imperial paganism evolved a universalizing tendency to contend with the threatening evangelistic spirit of an empowered Constantinian Christianity.

It was in the context of this incredibly dynamic religious world that the House of Aion mosaic was commissioned, and consequently, those scholars who have seen in the work the presence of Christian motifs have pointed to it as the *sine qua non* for favoring their interpretation over more conservative approaches. Yet surprisingly, although the imagery and symbolic themes of the mosaic have been explored in incredible detail, little has been written concerning how the particular religious environment of fourth-century Nea Paphos itself (and Cyprus more generally) might influence this interpretive debate. Ultimately, one can make compelling arguments—and such arguments have repeatedly been made—regarding the intentional presence of Christian motifs in this piece, yet without the lynchpin of supporting contextual evidence, one is always open to the plague of Ockham’s razor and the charge of mere coincidence. This paper, then, seeks to remedy that lack of contextualization by reconstructing the religious environment of Cyprus in the fourth century, in search of contextual clues that might support the above “Christian” interpretation of the mosaic. It will be demonstrated that, given such circumstances, it is highly likely that the commissioner of this work, although probably a wealthy pagan, had Christianity in mind when planning it, or at the very least would not have been ignorant of the fact that the pagan scenes which adorn the Aion mosaic bear a striking resemblance to prominent Christian ones. Indeed, one could not pick a better place than Cyprus to view

the competition between Christianity and traditional paganism on full display. Therefore, an ignorance of the implications that the mosaic might have had for competitive and polemical religious discourse, which has been researched exhaustively by modern scholars, would have been nearly impossible for an educated elite Cypriot to sustain.

The Ideological Function of Mosaic Pavements

At the beginning of her momentous survey of late antique religious mosaics, Rina Talgam notes that “observations of mosaic floors bring to light the diverse ways of communication and reveal cultural, religious, and social processes that were the outcome of close and direct contact with people of other faiths.”⁷ Throughout her work, Talgam paints a picture of religious mosaics as ideological spaces, which often mirrored the social tensions of late Roman society and served as proxies in a battleground of ideas. These works of art could be even more influential than written literature or legislation in a society where few were formally literate but in which most would have been intimately familiar with shared cultural stories and symbols, and for whom “reading” mosaics would have come naturally. Consequently, if the “Christian” interpretation of the House of Aion mosaic is correct, we should expect to see such a battleground on prominent display in the environment of Nea Paphos. And in fact, this is precisely what we do find. Indeed, ever since the introduction of Christianity to the island by the apostles Paul and Barnabas in the first century CE, Nea Paphos was a place of acute religious tension, serving as a backdrop for a drama between paganism and Christianity that unfolded over the course of three hundred years. In order to assess the level of religious tension that would have existed in Nea Paphos during the fourth century, it is thus essential to reconstruct, to the extent possible, the religious world into which Christianity was thrust when it entered Cyprus during the early first century CE.

The Religious World of Pagan Roman Nea Paphos

From the time of the late Bronze Age, Paphos was an important pan-Mediterranean religious site, serving as the home of one of the most famous pagan shrines in the ancient world, the Paphian Temple of Aphrodite. In Book Eight of *The Odyssey*, Homer tells us that this was the location of Aphrodite’s “grove and altar fragrant with burnt offerings,” and Greek tradition held that it was here that the goddess first set foot on land after being born from the foam of the sea.⁸ The Temple at Paphos dominated religious life on the island and remained the crown jewel of Cyprus into the Roman period, attracting pilgrims from around the known world.⁹ The temple had a strong established priesthood that asserted a considerable amount of authority over matters both religious and secular within Paphos (and which one can easily imagine clashing with island’s later powerful Christian bishops).¹⁰ This priesthood’s most important duty involved preparing for and overseeing the annual festival of Aphrodite, which, according to F.G. Maier and V. Karageorghis “was the

most important popular annual event in Cyprus, where games, musical, and literary contests were held in honor of the goddess.”¹¹

The worship of Aphrodite at the Paphian Temple also contained a distinctly imperial element. Coins minted on Cyprus—which made up a sizeable amount of Roman currency due to the island’s rich copper and iron sources—featured images of the Temple façade, advertising to the entire empire the religious importance of this site.¹² The emperors and their families from the time of Augustus were given statues at the sanctuary and we know that these rulers visited the Temple for consultation on multiple occasions, including, most famously, the emperor Titus, who Tacitus tells us met with the priest Sostratos to gain insight into his future.¹³ Additionally, during the Roman period the cult of Aphrodite at the Paphian temple seems to have been deeply intertwined with the phenomenon of emperor worship itself. An inscription bearing an oath of allegiance to the emperor Tiberius was found at the site of the sanctuary, whereby the island of Cyprus swore “by the offspring of Aphrodite who is the God Caesar Augustus. . .to vote [divine honors] to Rome, to Tiberius and to the sons of his blood, together with the other gods, and to none other at all.”¹⁴ T.B. Mitford points out that during the reign of Augustus, the emperor’s daughter “Julia and Livia his empress at Old Paphos were respectively [known as] the Goddess Augusta and the Goddess the New Aphrodite,” yet there is no evidence as to whether such designations continued.¹⁵ As a result of all of this, when Christians would later criticize the worship of Paphian Aphrodite, they would not only have been attacking traditional pagan religion, but also undermining a longstanding source of civic pride for Cypriots; an assault which could not have failed to provoke an intense backlash.

By far the most important aspect of Aphrodite worship at the Paphian Temple for our purposes, however, is the powerful sexual aspect attached to the cult, for this was certainly one of the features of Greco-Roman paganism that early Christians found most revolting, and which presumably would have served as the largest source of insurmountable tension between these two religious groups in the fourth century. Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, was commonly associated with sexuality, and this took on a heightened emphasis at Paphos, where the fertility of the goddess was seen as bound up with the economic prosperity of Cyprus itself. Possibly located on the site of a shrine to an indigenous Near Eastern fertility goddess, the Paphian Temple was a center for some of the most notorious pagan practices in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹⁶ Multiple ancient sources attest that temple prostitution took place there, and strong arguments have been advanced by scholars that human sacrifice even formed a part of its ritual practice.¹⁷

According to Strabo, visitors approached the Temple in a procession of sixty stadia from Nea Paphos to the old quarter of the city, and a Christian source declares that these pilgrims—men and women intermingled with each other—made the journey completely naked.¹⁸ Upon arrival at the sanctuary, devotees bought terracotta phalluses and lumps of salt to present as votive offerings, symbolizing the fertility of the goddess and her birth from the sea, respectively.¹⁹

The sexuality of Aphrodite was also tied, through a male-female consort relationship common to many Near Eastern fertility cults, to the god Apollo. This relationship may be significant given the puzzling fact that Aphrodite, despite her incredible importance at Paphos, appears nowhere in the House of Aion mosaic, or, for that matter, any of the other Paphian mosaics.²⁰ This is in contrast to Apollo, who appears in the Aion mosaic in a scene where he is depicted condemning the satyr Marsyas to death; a scene which has formed the foundation of the argument that the work contains an anti-Christian polemical message, with Marsyas being a stand-in for Christ and Apollo representing Pontius Pilate.²¹ Philip H. Young notes that “the fertility of Aphrodite was connected with the rich production of copper, born from the land itself, while her consort/husband [Apollo] was connected to the smelting operations performed on the ore.”²² It is also clear that the Roman road system on Cyprus “linked the temple of Apollo at Kourion and the temple of Aphrodite at Palaipaphos.”²³ Thus, it appears that a connection between these two deities ran deep in the mind of Cypriot pagans, so that one might easily serve as associative substitute for the other. If, then, the “Christian” interpretation of the House of Aion mosaic is correct, might Apollo condemning Christ-Marsyas potentially be seen as a rebuke by the great god himself to the Christians who would so slander and deride his beloved Aphrodite?

The large presence of Jews on the island of Cyprus during the Hellenistic and Roman periods should also be noted, for it further strengthens the notion that pagans in Paphos would have been intimately familiar with criticisms of Christianity, which they could have adopted and couched in their own terms in something like the House of Aion mosaic. Jewish immigration to the island was encouraged by the Ptolemies and by the first century CE Jews seem to have made up a sizeable portion of the Cypriot population.²⁴ In the Acts of the Apostles, for instance, when Paul and Barnabas first arrive on Cyprus, they “proclaim the word of God in the synagogues [plural] of the Jews” at Salamis, indicating that in at least one city there were multiple synagogues.²⁵ In 116 CE, under the reign of Hadrian, Jewish forces commanded by Artemion led a failed revolt on Cyprus, resulting in an imperial edict that expelled Jews from the island. Yet whereas previous generations of scholars saw Hadrian’s edict as completing eliminating Cyprus’ Jewish population, recent evidence suggests a flourishing of Jewish life and institutions after this period and well throughout the fourth century.²⁶

Significantly, Jewish magical traditions, syncretized into a pagan religious milieu, appear to have been important on the island, and many Hebrew *defixiones* have been found which combine imprecatory prayers to Yahweh with prayers to other gods.²⁷ There is also widespread archaeological evidence for the presence of ‘God-fearers’ (the *theosebes* of the New Testament) on Cyprus in the first and second centuries, a mysterious class of pagans sympathetic to the Jewish faith, who seem to have shared many Jewish ideas and ritual practices but were nonetheless not full converts to Judaism.²⁸ All of this suggests that a complex cultural dialogue between Jews and pagans existed on Cyprus and increases the

likelihood that Jewish critiques of Christianity would have been known by elite Cypriot pagans in the fourth century; and in fact, the story of Paul's poor reception on the island, including the opposition of the Jewish magician Bar-Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles, indicates that there *was* in fact a perceived hostility of Jews towards Christians even as early as the first century CE.²⁹

Thus we have seen that by the first century CE and certainly into the fourth, the perfect set of circumstances for religious conflict with a new and exclusivist sect had been created on Cyprus. This was a confident religious world "full of gods," and the added ingredient of a Christianity that, as time went on, increasingly asserted its claims to dominance and exclusivity on the island, could not have failed to provoke a confrontation that we would expect to reverberate throughout the historical and archeological records.³⁰ The interaction between Christians and pagans in Nea Paphos (and Cyprus generally) certainly excited antagonistic reactions in Christians, which are preserved in literature and art; it is unreasonable to assume that such dissension would not produce a similarly locatable reflection in pagan ideological spaces, such as mosaic floors.

The Christianization of Cyprus

In order to gain an idea of the threat it would have posed to the old religious order, we will now examine the rise of Christianity on Cyprus. It should be noted at the outset, however, that such a task is fraught with difficulty, and must necessarily proceed more through hint and implication than by way of conclusive statement. As Franz Georg Maier points out, "St. Paul's visit to Paphos was an event of momentous significance for the entire subsequent history of the island. Yet we know next to nothing about the struggle between old cults and the new faith during the first centuries of Roman rule."³¹ This I will attempt to remedy by piecing together various fragmentary lines of evidence, in order to reconstruct a "religious world" in something like the manner of the previous section.

First-Century Christian Cyprus

Though it is often remarked that Christianity entered Cyprus with the arrival of the apostles Paul and Barnabas in the forties CE, this is not strictly true. In fact, the Acts of the Apostles tells us that in the wake of the Christian persecutions provoked by the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen in Jerusalem, "those who had been scattered. . . traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch," making the Cypriot Christian community one of the earliest Christian communities outside of Israel.³² This first group of missionaries spread the Gospel "only among Jews," and it was in fact Cypriot Christians themselves who first "went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."³³ Thus, by the time Paul and Barnabas (the latter one of these Cypriot Christian converts) arrived sometime in the forties CE, there must have been a fledgling community that received them. The arrival of these two apostles, however, is rightly seen to mark a turning point in the Christian history of the island due to the power and

significance of the event the Book of Acts tells us transpired in Nea Paphos upon their entrance—namely the conversion of the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus to Christianity—which is so compelling as to justify quoting it in full:

They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun. Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.³⁴

This scene is filled with such pertinent information for a reconstruction of the relationship between Christianity and traditional cults on Cyprus during the next three centuries that it must be unpacked in some detail. The author of the Book of Acts (identified as Luke) clearly meant to portray the conversion of the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus as a pivotal moment in the history of Paul’s evangelistic career, as evidenced by the fact that it is in this passage where the name “Saul” is first changed to “Paul.”³⁵ And indeed, if the New Testament account is to be believed, such a conversion was monumental, as Cyprus would have thus become “for a short time the first territory ever ruled by a Christian,” foreshadowing, as later Christians saw it, the conversion of the emperor Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the official state cult of the Roman Empire.³⁶ This dramatic event could not have failed to reverberate loudly throughout the entire island, and such an unexpected occurrence must have surely caused some pagan interest in understanding (and combatting) the strange new cult—especially in a city as stridently pagan as Nea Paphos. Moreover, it is not hard to imagine conversation about the conversion continuing well into the fourth century, as Christians paraded it as a badge of honor and divine favor during the darkest moments of imperial persecution.³⁷ If Sergius Paulus really was converted to Christianity by the Apostle Paul, it is simply unimaginable that an elite Paphian pagan, living in a post-Constantinian empire, would not have known the story of this incredible event, which transpired in his very own city.³⁸

What is even more fascinating about the Sergius Paulus episode, however, are the details that the Acts account provides about elite pagan life within Nea Paphos. At the beginning of the passage we are told that “the proconsul, an intelligent man,

sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.”³⁹ As Cypriot archaeologist and New Testament specialist Thomas W. Davis suggests:

It is most likely that Paul and Barnabas are invited to be part of the after-dinner ‘entertainment’ at a banquet given by the governor. Philosophical readings and discussions would be a normal part of the evening at the home of an ‘intelligent man’—one who was educated, spoke Greek, was interested in philosophical questions, and therefore was open to a new faith. The inclusion of the Jewish magician Bar-Jesus makes it almost a certainty that this was more of a social occasion than an official meeting held during office hours. The rival philosophers would be pitted against one another for the enjoyment of the dinner guests and, in the governor’s case, out of an honest interest in the subject.⁴⁰

If this interpretation of Paul and Barnabas’ meeting with Paulus is correct, it has intriguing implications for the contextualization of the House of Aion mosaic. Here we would have on display a competitive philosophical conversation between members of different religious faiths taking place in the *triclinium* of a wealthy Roman villa. More important than the question of whether or not such an occasion is in fact what the biblical text is describing, however, is the notion that events like this were nonetheless a common source of evening entertainment for Roman elites to host at their homes. It is clear, based on the excavation of several other villas comparable to the House of Aion within the ancient city, that an elite existed in Nea Paphos during the fourth century with the wealth and capability to host such events. In fact, the so-called “House of Theseus” villa, which has been identified as the home of a fourth-century proconsul like Sergius Paulus, contains *triclinium* mosaics similar in style and content to those at the “House of Aion.”⁴¹ Might the “House of Aion” mosaic, then, be seen as replicating the kind of interreligious conversation that would have occurred in the dining area in which it was placed, or even acting itself as a stimulus for philosophical discussion among dinner guests of different religious backgrounds? Perhaps the mosaic might even have been meant to poke fun at such conversations, or to mirror the confusion they would have provoked, by mixing up classical pagan scenes with important Christian ones. The connection between these planned after-dinner religious disputations, the specific content of the Aion mosaic, and the mosaic’s placement in the dining hall of a Roman villa, should further mitigate against attempts to dismiss the apparently polemical and Christian nature of its imagery as merely coincidental.

Fourth-Century Christian Cyprus

After the first century CE, our knowledge of the Christian community on Cyprus retreats into what Mitford has called “something of a dark age,” before reappearing with a thunderous noise in the fourth century.⁴² From the dimly lit chapels of the Avia Solomoni and Avios Lambrianos catacombs emerge the dazzling fixtures of great basilicas, dotting cities like Paphos and Salamis with their radiant and

symbolic presence.⁴³ By the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325, the small island could boast three attending bishops, and less than twenty years later, at the Council of Sardica, more than twelve bishops from Cyprus were present.⁴⁴ In 327, on the return journey home from her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, even Constantine's mother Helena supposedly made a visit to the island, stopping to explore its holy monasteries and to deposit a nail of the True Cross in the Satalian gulf.⁴⁵ If pagan society had forgotten about this strange cult that long ago converted a Roman proconsul, throughout the fourth century it was boldly and unceasingly reminded of it again. Consequently a lack of knowledge of (and opinion about) Christianity would have been utterly inexcusable for elite pagan Cypriots to sustain. Even if a pagan had wanted to remain free of participation in this competitive religious exchange, such a newly emboldened and confrontational Christianity would not have let them. For Christians during this period contented themselves with nothing less than an attack on the very foundations of pagan Cypriot society.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most fearsome of the fourth-century Christian assaults upon the edifices of pagan religion centered on the Paphian cult of Aphrodite. Of all the Olympian deities, Aphrodite—the “whore,” the “wanton hussy,” the “goddess of laughing eyes”—was the most universally reviled by the Fathers of the early Church.⁴⁶ For Christians, the worship of this goddess at Nea Paphos showcased the horrors of paganism more compellingly than anything else. Christians living on Cyprus would have daily been confronted by pilgrims on their way to the great Temple to perform those unspeakable acts—ritual prostitution, human sacrifice—about which they could only speculate. Maier suggests that these Christians may also have felt anxiety over similarities between Aphrodite and the Virgin Mary, both of whom were venerated as model females for “representing a spectrum of idealized female qualities.”⁴⁷

The most detailed surviving Cypriot Christian attack upon the Paphian Aphrodite cult is preserved in the pseudo-epigraphical *Acts of Barnabas*, a work that professes to have been written by John Mark (Paul's assistant on his journey to Cyprus with Barnabas), but which was actually composed in the fourth century by a native Cypriot. As Philip H. Young points out, “the geographical and cultural details of the account. . . are so specific and different from the story told in Acts that they demonstrate that the writer had a firsthand knowledge of Cyprus.”⁴⁸ Thomas W. Davis goes so far as to speculate that the text may have even been the unified “product of a campaign of the institutionalized Cypriot Church to gain autocephalous status,” a cause for which it would fight well into the fifth century.⁴⁹ Regardless of its author, however, the *Acts of Barnabas* is important because it is essentially an eyewitness account of the religious climate of its day—albeit reflected through a first-century guise—which can be taken as a representative of the types of polemical religious discourse that took place within the context of fourth-century Cyprus.

The account concerns the return journey of Barnabas and John Mark to Cyprus, this time without the accompaniment of Paul. When the two arrive at Paphos they

are prevented from entering the city by the same Jewish magician, Bar-Jesus, whom Paul blinded in the Book of Acts for hindering the conversion of Sergius Paulus. Instead of entering Nea Paphos, then, the men head for Old Paphos, the old quarter of the city where the Temple of Aphrodite is located. On the way there, they find Rhodon, a bewildered temple servant, who converts to Christianity and agrees to travel with them. Suddenly, across the road comes a procession of naked men and women, who are making their way up to the Temple in the distance. Seeing that there “was great deception and error in that place,” Barnabas rebukes the building, causing “the western part [to fall] so that many were wounded, and many of them also died. . . [or] fled to the nearby temple of Apollo.”⁵⁰

The remainder of narrative after this point, though fascinating in its own right, is irrelevant for our purposes. What is remarkable about this account is that here we have a fourth-century Cypriot Christian indirectly fantasizing about the violent destruction of the Paphian temple. The reference to the naked procession additionally shows that despite their cultural ascendancy, Christians were still deeply disturbed by the continuance of the age-old religious customs of pagan Paphos, which they felt the need not only to vehemently argue against but also to actively stifle. If the *Acts of Barnabas* is at all indicative of common attitudes of Christians living in cities like Nea Paphos or Salamis, then it is quite clear that a fiercely competitive spirit consumed Christian religious discourse on the island. It would be quite odd if elite pagans did not respond to such radical rhetoric in some significant way.

What is even more striking is that Christian criticism of the Paphian Temple of Aphrodite was not confined to native Cypriots like the anonymous author of the *Acts of Barnabas*, but also involved prominent churchmen from around the Mediterranean world. As early as the second century, Clement of Alexandria could pen vicious tirades against the cult, arguing that Cinyras, the legendary Homeric king of Cyprus and supposed founder of the Paphian Temple, “dared to bring forth from night to the light of day the lewd orgies of Aphrodite in his eagerness to deify a strumpet of his own country.”⁵¹ In his early fourth-century *Adversus Gentes*, a work composed in response to the Diocletianic persecutions, Arnobius ridiculed those pilgrims to the Temple who “bring stated fees as to a harlot.”⁵² Writing also in a fourth-century context, Firmicus Maternus echoed this rhetoric, denouncing the “senseless consecrations” of the poor temple servants who were duped into serving a false and wicked goddess.⁵³

Even the great Jerome took an interest in combatting the Paphian Aphrodite. Indeed, it is arguable that his *Life of Hilarion*, a biography of Nea Paphos’ first local saint, is intentionally modeled to portray Hilarion—a man who spent his entire life fighting the demons of lust and sexual temptation—as the antithesis of the Aphrodite cult. Born in Palestine to “idolatrous” parents, in his youth Hilarion is inspired by the example of Saint Anthony to venture out into the desert and become an anchorite.⁵⁴ While in the desert, Satan tempts him by “light[ing] in his maturing body the fires of lust” and conjuring up frequent appearances of

beautiful naked women.⁵⁵ Through repeated prayer and fasting, Hilarion resists these temptations and for over thirty years he works miracles and performs exorcisms on those who come from all around Egypt to visit his cell. During the course of his time in Egypt, we are told that by grace he developed the ability to literally smell vices like lust, even in inanimate objects. In one particularly fascinating instance, a demon-possessed nun from Gaza is healed, whom Jerome tells us was cursed when a man filled with lust for her carved “revolting figures. . . on a plate of Cyprian brass” and buried it beneath her house.⁵⁶ Yet another telling anecdote involves Hilarion conducting a vigil for Saint Anthony at the Egyptian town of Aphroditon (named, of course, after the goddess). Becoming disillusioned by the fame that has grown up around his name, towards the end of his life the saint decides on “taking ship for some solitary island. . . [to] find concealment in the sea,” eventually making his way to the island of Cyprus.⁵⁷ Here he makes his reclusive abode in the hills above Paphos, which “had close by the ruins of an ancient temple from which, as he himself was wont to relate and his disciples testify, the voices of such countless demons re-echoed night and day, that you might have thought there was an army of them.”⁵⁸ This “ancient temple” is almost certainly the Paphian Temple of Aphrodite, which during the later fourth century was subjected to a series of strong earthquakes, possibly the reason why it is described by Jerome as “ruins.”⁵⁹ Even more revealing is the fact that we are told Hilarion was “highly pleased at the idea of having his opponents in the neighborhood,” a statement in line with the fiercely competitive religious attitudes which I argue existed on Cyprus during the fourth century.⁶⁰

If the Paphian cult of Aphrodite was notorious enough to garner the scorn of prominent figures across the Mediterranean, how much louder must the denunciations of local Cypriot Christians have been? These would have been overbearing, even oppressive, to the island’s pagan population, demanding from them at least some kind of response; and in fact there is no evidence that Aphrodite worshippers surrendered gently. To the contrary, archaeological evidence exists for occupation of the Paphian Temple long after the emperor Theodosius I formally closed all pagan centers of worship in 391.⁶¹ This is hardly surprising, for it is not likely that a cult central to the religious life of Cyprus since the Bronze Age would have submitted to an upstart religion without a bitter fight. However, over the course of the later fourth century, as pagans became increasingly subjected to state persecution, they may have decided to become more covert in their protests against the new religious order. One can easily imagine meetings between pagans within the private space of a villa becoming analogous to gatherings of coffee-shop radicals in eighteenth-century Paris. And what better space for a covert subversion of the powers that be than the mosaic decoration of a dining room floor?

A World of Fluid Exchange

Thus we have seen that by the time of the fourth century, Cyprus was a veritable battleground for religious conflict, in which the House of Aion mosaic, if it was

in fact intended as a polemical statement, would have been well-placed. Before concluding our examination of the context of the mosaic, however, it is worth complicating this picture to a degree by noting that militant ideological hostility and division were not the only forces at work on the island. Accompanying them was also a spirit of mutual exchange between groups with which antagonism often, paradoxically, went hand in hand. Indeed, despite their apparently irreconcilable differences, it is remarkable how much pagans and Christians on Cyprus had in common during this period.

This phenomenon can be observed most prominently in art, and particularly mosaic floors, where both groups were completely comfortable utilizing (and no doubt expropriating) the same artistic themes, symbols, and styles for their own purposes. A look at the mosaic floors of the villas surrounding the House of Aion, for example, reveals the same mosaic patterns that were being used to adorn fourth-century Christian basilicas across the Mediterranean world. The images covering the floors of these elite pagan homes—lush Dionysian flora, complex geometric patterns, personifications of the four seasons, depictions of animal hunts, and peacocks—can all be found in Christian church mosaics, suggesting a fluidity in religious ideas and a willingness to interact with and learn from the other, despite formal displays of opposition.⁶²

Yet rather than undermining the case for an atmosphere of intense religious competition on Cyprus, this actually serves to strengthen it. Two sets of Greek mosaic inscriptions in the early fifth-century Christian “Eustolios Complex” at the site of ancient Kourion are particularly illustrative of this point. Named after a wealthy Christian donor who dedicated this recreational complex to the public, two of the inscriptions in the building—in the East and South halls, respectively—utilize pagan dactylic hexameter and language reminiscent of the Homeric epics to convey explicitly Christian messages:

In place of big stones (walls) and solid iron, bright bronze or even adamant, this house has girt itself with the much venerated symbols of Christ. The sisters Reverence, Prudence (Temperance) and Piety to the God tend (look after) this exedra and the fragrant hall.⁶³

Placed in public rooms that would have been daily occupied by local Cypriots, both pagan and Christian, the very deliberate statement made by these inscriptions would have been understood by all. As Ino Nicolaou notes, in using “pagan literary forms to express the message of the new religion. . .these inscriptions were meant to convey the triumph of Christianity over paganism.”⁶⁴ Thus, in the very act of cultural exchange comes the reemergence of cultural hostility. Here in fact we see Christians, within the context of a mosaic floor, expropriating pagan symbols to subvert paganism, which is precisely what proponents of the “Christian” interpretation of the House of Aion mosaic argue that pagans intended to do to Christianity in commissioning that mosaic. If such a means of

subversion was being employed by one group in Cypriot society, it is extremely likely that the other was utilizing the same tools of religious propaganda.

Conclusion

Through this examination, then, we have seen that the religious context of fourth-century Cyprus lends a tremendous weight to that interpretation of the House of Aion mosaic which sees it as reflecting in some way Christian imagery and themes, either merely in a neutral sense or, more likely, in a way actively hostile to the Christian religion. This interpretation, which rests on the assumption that Cyprus mirrored the larger trend of intense religious turbulence and competition characteristic of the fourth-century Roman Empire at large, has been demonstrated to accord closely with a range of textual, archaeological, and artistic evidence. Consequently, to posit that the apparently Christian imagery in this pagan mosaic is simply a projection of the dramatic desires of sensationalist scholars onto a fairly conventional piece of Roman villa art is entirely unreasonable. As much as its adherents might like to claim the mantle of sober-headed restraint and conservatism, such an attitude, if maintained in light of the contextual evidence we have analyzed, is profoundly *un-conservative* and ends up making more unverifiable assumptions than the interpretation it sets itself against does.

As I hope to have shown, such scholars actually labor under a heavy burden of proof and must offer a compelling explanation as to why elite pagans would have remained either ignorant of or apathetic to the anti-pagan polemicizing of a hostile Cypriot Christianity, despite the fact that such influences would have surrounded them on a daily basis. They must additionally answer the pressing question of why, given the perfect set of artistic tools—furnished by abundant Christian examples, including the artwork of Christian mosaic floors—for the participation in these ideological wars, such pagans would have abstained from them, even as the foundations of their religion were under attack. To assume this kind of docility would be completely out of character with the widely documented reactions of pagans to Christian effrontery throughout the rest of the empire, and for this reason it must be soundly rejected.

NOTES

¹ Peter Brown, *Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 38.

² Coins found in the mortar underneath the mosaic have provided it with a *terminus post quem* of 318-324 CE.

³ From left-to-right, the five narrative panels depict: the meeting of Leda and the Swan; the Nymphs bringing gifts to the infant god Dionysus; Dionysus' triumphal procession into Athens atop a wagon drawn by centaurs; and Apollo justly condemning the satyr Marsyas to death. This continuous flow of images is interrupted by a middle register featuring a beauty contest between Cassiopeia and the Nereids, presided over by Zeus, Aion, Athena, Helios, and Selene.

⁴ Although Daszewski himself has since abandoned his original interpretation, as put forward in *Dionysus der Erlöser: Griesche Mythen im Spätantiken Antiken Cypern* (Mainz: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985).

⁵ An excellent overview of the scholarship, which highlights the interpretive nuances of each scholar involved in the debate, has been provided by Olszewski in the appendix to his article, “The iconographic programme of the Cyprus mosaic from the House of Aion reinterpreted as an anti-Christian polemic,” in *Et in Arcadia Ego: Studia Memoriae Professoris Thomae Mikocki Dicata*, ed. Vitoldo Dobrowski (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2013), 234-235.

⁶ For a rich narrative account of the fourth century, which highlights the incredible religious turbulence of this period, see Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971). The first decade of the century, from 303-311, witnessed the so-called “Great Persecution” of Christians under Emperor Diocletian. In 313 CE, co-emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the famous ‘Edict of Milan,’ which formally established religious toleration throughout the empire. By 325, the Church could hold its own empire-wide ecumenical council at Nicaea, overseen by Constantine, the first Christian emperor. However, the tides were temporarily turned in 355, when the militant pagan Julian the Apostate ascended to the throne, re-instating a persecution of Christians and fostering an evangelical paganism across the empire. In 391, the Christian emperor Theodosius I formally closed all pagan temples and established Christianity as the official state religion.

⁷ Rina Talgam, *Mosaics of Faith: Floors of Pagans, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy Land* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2014), 1.

⁸ Homer, *Od.* 8.363

⁹ F.G. Maier and V. Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology* (Nicosia: A.G. Leventis Foundation, 1984), 270.

¹⁰ Terence Bruce Mitford, “The Cults of Roman Cyprus,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* 18.3 (1990), 2196.

¹¹ Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 271.

¹² *Ibid.*, 249.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 278; Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.2-4. Titus’ visit is also mentioned by Suetonius, *Life of Titus* 5.

¹⁴ Terence Bruce Mitford, ‘A Cypriot Oath of Allegiance to Tiberius,’ *Journal of Roman Studies* 50.1-2 (1960), 75–79.

¹⁵ Mitford, “Cults of Roman Cyprus,” 2195.

¹⁶ Philip H. Young, “The Cypriot Aphrodite Cult: Paphos, Rantidi, and Saint Barnabas,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 64. 1 (2005), 23.

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.199; Ovid, *Met.* 10.238-46; Ennius, *Euhemerus* 134-38. Mitford, “Cults of Roman Cyprus,” 2189, argues compelling for the presence of human sacrifice at the Paphian Temple by noting that Ammianus Marcellinus and Porphyrius of Tyre both compare it to the Temple of Zeus Olympius at Salamis, where we know such sacrifices did take place. Moreover, the latter, in his *De Abstinencia* 2.14 comments that on Cyprus “Asiatic rites and human sacrifices” take place “in the temple of Zeus and lesser shrines.” The Paphian Temple was clearly the most important religious site on the island, so that if human sacrifices were being performed even at “lesser shrines,” it is probable that they were also being offered to Aphrodite at Paphos. Additionally, it is worth pointing out, as does J. Hackett, *A History of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus from the Coming of the Apostles to the Commencement of the British Occupation* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), 11, that human sacrifices were offered to Zeus at Salamis during the month of Aphrodision, making a connection between such sacrifices and Aphrodite likely.

¹⁸ Strabo, *Geography* 14.6.3; “The Acts of Barnabas,” trans. Alexander Walker, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 495.

¹⁹ Mitford, “Cults of Roman Cyprus,” 2180.

²⁰ She does, however, appear with her son Eros in statues recovered from the villas of Nea Paphos, for which, see Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 253, 268.

²¹ Olszewski, “The iconographic programme of the Cyprus mosaic,” 226.

²² Young, “The Cypriot Aphrodite Cult,” 28.

²³ Thomas W. Davis, "Saint Paul on Cyprus: Archaeology and the Transformation of an Apostle," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 416.

²⁴ Davis, "Saint Paul on Cyprus," 416.

²⁵ Acts 13:5 ESV

²⁶ Mitford, "Cults of Roman Cyprus," 2205.

²⁷ See Mitford, *The Inscriptions of Kourion* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971), 246-283, for a collection of these *defixiones*. More recently, a fifth-century amulet was discovered at Nea Paphos in 2015 by a team of Polish archaeologists, which combines Hebrew script and imprecatory prayers to Yahweh with the invocation of Egyptian gods and symbols. Sarah Griffiths, "Mysterious 1,500-year-old charm unearthed," *Daily Mail*, last modified January 5, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2897187/Mysterious-1-500-year-old-charm-unearthed-Palindrome-amulet-reads-backwards-forwards-sheds-light-ancient-religious-beliefs.html>. For an overview of pagan usage of Jewish magical traditions in the late antique period, see Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 196-201.

²⁸ Mitford, "Cults of Roman Cyprus," 2206. On the identity, beliefs, and practices of the God-fearers, see Martin S. Jaffee *Early Judaism: Religious Worlds of the First Judaic Millennium* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2006), 131-3.

²⁹ As Thomas W. Davis notes, "Cypriot magic was often used to prevent people from speaking and blindness could be used as a preventative measure in these cases." Thus when Bar-Jesus, in Acts 13:8, "opposes" Paul and Barnabas and tries "to turn the proconsul [Sergius Paulus] from the faith," he is most likely performing a type of spell to prevent the apostles from *speaking* the Gospel. Paul, in turn, silences the magician by blinding him. All of this, then, amounts to a kind of war of words between religious groups that might be reflective of a larger dialogic competition on the island.

³⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima* 1.5.9. Aristotle here is famously quoting Thales of Miletus, the canonical 'first philosopher' of Western history, who sums up succinctly yet profoundly the pagan religious worldview.

³¹ Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 283.

³² Acts 11:19-20 ESV

³³ Idem.

³⁴ Acts 13:6-12 ESV

³⁵ Saul, a Roman citizen, does not actually change his name but instead decides to be called by his Roman *cognomen*, signifying that his evangelizing mission extends to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The fact that his newly adopted name is equivalent to the name of the Roman consul he is about to convert may also be significant.

³⁶ Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 283.

³⁷ Davis, "Saint Paul on Cyprus," 416. Barnabas became a very important early saint on Cyprus and veneration of his purported tomb, located on the site of the present day Monastery of St. Barnabas in Famagusta, probably became a pilgrimage site from an early date. The journeying of large groups of Christian travelers to this site would have drawn a great amount of attention to the story of Sergius Paulus' conversion, making it even more likely that educated pagans would have been familiar with at least an outline of the Acts account.

³⁸ Sergius Paulus' governorship is attested by three independent inscriptions (two in Cyprus and one in Rome). For an overview of the scholarship on these inscriptions see, Alanna Nobbs, "Cyprus," in *The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting*, Vol. 2, *The Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 279-90.

³⁹ Acts 13:7 ESV

⁴⁰ Davis, "Saint Paul on Cyprus," 420.

⁴¹ Demetrios Michaelides, "Paphos" in *Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 2; W.A. Daszewski and D. Michaelides, *Guide to the Paphos Mosaics* (Nicosia:

Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 1988), 52-3. The building itself shows evidence of occupation from at least the late second century CE to the seventh century, but the mosaics in question have been dated to the fourth century.

⁴² Mitford, "Cults of Roman Cyprus," 2209.

⁴³ Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 291-2.

⁴⁴ Ino Nicolau, "The Transition from Paganism to Christianity as revealed in the Mosaic Inscriptions of Cyprus," in *Mosaic: Festschrift for A.H.S. Megaw*, ed. Judith Herrin, Margaret Mullett, and Catherine Otten-Froux (Athens: British School at Athens, 2001), 13.

⁴⁵ J. Hackett, *A History of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus*, 9-10.

⁴⁶ Ronald Schenk, *The Soul of Beauty: A Psychological Investigation of Appearance* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 75-76. Schenk quotes a wide range of early Christian Church Fathers on the subject of Aphrodite as part of a larger genealogical investigation into contemporary Western conceptions of beauty.

⁴⁷ Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 290. Epiphanius, the fourth-century bishop of Salamis, notes in his *Panarion* 51, 30, the connection between the god Aion's birth from Kore the Virgin and the birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary. Moreover, he accuses the pagans of celebrating this birth during the Saturnalia festival on January 6th as a deliberate attempt to rival the Christian celebration of the Epiphany. Thus, it seems likely that Cyprian Christians would have also been drawing parallels between Aphrodite and the Virgin Mary. For commentary on the implications Epiphanius' statements might have for interpreting the House of Aion mosaic, see Elizabeth Kessler-Dimin, "Tradition and Transmission: Hermes Kourotrophos in Nea Paphos, Cyprus," in *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Gregg Gardner and Kevin L. Osterloh (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 280-1.

⁴⁸ Young, "The Cypriot Aphrodite Cult," 37-8.

⁴⁹ Davis, "Saint Paul on Cyprus," 236.

⁵⁰ "The Acts of Barnabas," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, 495.

⁵¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2

⁵² Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes* 5.19

⁵³ Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore Profanarum Religionum* 10.

⁵⁴ Jerome, *Life of Hilarion* 2

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 43

⁵⁹ Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos: History and Archaeology*, 285. Maier notes that "the earthquakes of the later fourth century most likely hit Palaepaphos in the same way as Nea Paphos and Curium and may thus have contributed to the decline of the Sanctuary."

⁶⁰ Jerome, *Life of Hilarion*, 43

⁶¹ Young, "The Cypriot Aphrodite Cult," 26, points to archaeological evidence revealing that the site of the Paphian Temple of Aphrodite remained inhabited until the seventh century.

⁶² For an in-depth examination of the mosaic programs in the excavated Paphian villas, see W.A. Daszewski and D. Michaelides, *Guide to the Paphos Mosaics* (Nicosia: Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 1988). Consider how similar these images are to—taking a random example—the mosaic program of the Christian pavements in the Kadmeia at Thebes, for which, see Eugenia Gerousi-Bendermacher, "A New Look at an Early Christian Mosaic Pavement from Thebes," in *Viewing Greece: Cultural and Political Agency in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean*, ed. Sharon E. J. Gerstel (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016).

⁶³ Nicolau, "The Transition from Paganism to Christianity," 14-15. See also, Mitford, *The Inscriptions of Kourion*, 353-355.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.