Ave Maris Stella: The Maritime Cultus of the Madonna in Late Antiquity

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It has become commonplace for scholars to imagine, in the iconography of the Christian Madonna, a vector for the survival of earlier cultic practises. Miroslav Marcovich famously wrote of “the mighty Sumerian-Accadian goddess of love and fertility, of heaven, sea, and war” who, transported “from Mesopotamia to Greece... changed her name to Aphrodite” before transferring “her functions to the Virgin Mary as a Regina caeli, Stella marina, and Maria lactans—in a word, as the Panagía Aphrodítissa of Cyprus”. (Marcovich, 1996, 57–8)

Similarly, Stephen Benko wrote that Marian piety was “the natural outgrowth of the goddess-cults in the ancient world”, and that, in “its veneration of the Virgin Mary, not only did Roman Catholic Christianity absorb many elements of the cults of Greek and Roman goddesses, but Mary in effect replaced these deities and continued them in a Christian form.” (Benko, 1993, 2–4)

Both Benko and Marcovich were writing at a time when Classical scholarship on this subject found itself dovetailing with popular culture and this coalition has served to create an enduring ontological legacy, a belief that “Christianity deliberately adopted the images and symbols of powerful goddesses for saints and the Virgin Mary.” (Monaghan, 2010, ix)

At the same time that Classicists such as Benko and Marcovich were reading Marian iconography as evidence for the Christian assimilation of earlier beliefs, however, Anthropologists were acknowledging that such projections of syncretism were unsustainable given the documented experience of modern missionaries and the overwhelming and transnational evidence of cultural resistance to the imposition of extrinsic ideologies. In his analysis of a penitential fraternity centred in the South-west of the United States, Carlo Severi, for example, argued that the cult of Lady Sebastiana, rather than preserving an amalgam of indigenous and imported beliefs, “re-uses” (in a Warburgian sense) “preexisting materials in order to invent a new image” contradicting the various preceding traditions “in an almost sacrilegious way, thereby signalling a crisis in the traditional cult and the birth of a new belief.” (Severi, 2015, 319–320)

Could it not be that we witness a similar phenomenon in the Marian iconography of late antiquity? Not the survival of earlier cultic practises but, rather, their deliberate erasure?

This paper will explore that question in regard to representations of the Madonna Stella Maris (Our Lady, Star of the Sea) and the extent to which such representations may have served as a vector for the erasure of pre-existing goddess worship. To what extent did the proliferation of this maritime aspect of the Marian cultus contradict the earlier traditions of those goddesses, and to what extent did it signal “a crisis in the traditional cult and the birth of a new belief”? 
Works Cited


Monaghan, P. (Ed.), *Goddesses in World Culture* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010)


Warburg, A. *Schlangenritual: Ein reisebericht* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1939)