

Marian Miracles at Constantinople and Lepanto, 1422 and 1571

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Luke Clossey in a course on Jesus in the fifteenth century, History 468W: Writing Jesus. The assignment asked students to “research any aspect of the cult of Jesus in the period 1300 to 1600.” The paper uses Chicago citation style.

This paper compares the miraculous actions of the Virgin Mary during a 1422 siege of Constantinople and 1571 Battle of Lepanto. Avoiding secular skepticism against miracles, it centers the perspectives of fourteenth and fifteenth century believers by reading their accounts as faithful and accurate. From there, it defines three categories of miracle – direct-action, manipulation of human actions, and indirect, ambiguous actions that connote absolute power – and closes by questioning such categorizations altogether.

Mother of God. Our Lady of Peace. Queen of Heaven. The Virgin Mary has held such titles for centuries, titles that connote charity, holiness, and benevolence. However, she has also held titles of another nature. The Virgin of Battles. Our Lady the Warrior’s Guide. Empress of Helle. These two identities are more entangled than twenty-first century readers might expect. The difference between “fearless guardian of her devotees” and “implacable punisher of her foes,” after all, is largely a matter of perspective.¹ Since Antiquity, embattled Christians have called on her to intercede in all manner of sieges, struggles and skirmishes. Often, records show, she has answered them.

But what is Mary actually attested to have done? I will answer that question for two instances of early modern miracles. The first is her 1422 defense of Constantinople from an Ottoman siege. The second is her 1571 granting of victory to the Catholic League at the Battle of Lepanto, also against the

¹ Mary Joan Winn Leith, *The Virgin Mary: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 105.

Ottomans.² I will examine them within three overlapping, graduated categories: direct actions, manipulations of human actions, and indirect, ambiguous actions that connote absolute power.

Historical Context

Since “the late 4th or early 5th century” Christians have prayed to Mary for intercession on God’s behalf.³ Among Constantinopolitans, this support was expected. For them, Mary was *Theotokos* (God-bearer) and “invincible champion.”⁴ Their city, they believed, was also her city.⁵ The fifteenth century monk Symeon of Thessalonica saw symmetry in “the Queen who rules over all” being guardian to “the city which is queen of worldly things.”⁶ The besieged Constantinopolitans of 1422 would have had deep civic memories of similar Marian interventions dating back to her thwarting of an Avar and Persian siege in 626.⁷ In the intervening centuries, though, Byzantium had declined. By the fifteenth, it was financially bereft, territorially diminished, and but one of a number of vassal states to the ever-encroaching Ottoman Empire.⁸

Her intervention at Lepanto was less precedented, and thus prayed for all the more fervently. Responding to rising Protestant conversions, Pope Pius V (r. 1566-1572) had heavily promoted the (Mary-centred) Rosary prayers and sought Catholic solidarity around a strong and militant Virgin Mother.⁹ He was also

² From here, I will use the years 1422 and 1571 to denote the battles that occurred within them. Also note that, although the Muslim Ottomans are the antagonists of my historical subjects, Mary is also an important and fascinating figure in Islam.

³ Leith, 38.

⁴ “Akathistos Hymn,” trans. Vasiliki Limberis in *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Constantinople* (London: Routledge, 1994), 149.

⁵ Norman H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publisher, 1955), 254.

⁶ “The Logos Historikos of Symeon Archbishop of Thessalonica,” trans. and ed. John R. Melville Jones in *Venice and Thessalonica 1423-1430: The Greek Accounts* (Padova: Unipress, 2006), 113.

⁷ Florin Leonte, *Imperial Visions of Late Byzantium: Manuel II Palaiologos and Rhetoric in Purple* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 81.

⁸ Margaret Helen Purdie, “An Account by John Cananus of the Siege of Constantinople in 1422” (masters’ thesis, University of Western Australia, 2009), xi-xii.

⁹ Rita George-Tvrtkovic, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History* (Mawah: Paulist Press, 2018), ch. 5. This edition does not include page numbers.

“preoccupied with Turkish naval power” and by 1571 had mustered a Catholic League of states to oppose its maritime endeavours.¹⁰ Before Lepanto, fleet commander Don Juan “kept a statue of Mary aboard his ship and required his troops to pray to her before the battle,” prayers echoed by Christians in Rome.¹¹ Still, it seemed unlikely that they could defeat the “previously unstoppable” Ottomans.¹² Like those besieged Ottomans of 1422, they needed a miracle. But what sort of miracle?

Methodology

But before *that*, what is a miracle? Put simply, “an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.”¹³ Importantly, this definition avoids the modern connection between ‘miraculous’ and ‘uncommon.’ For my historical subjects, Marian miracles were the opposite of uncommon: “by the 15th century most [European] churches could claim a miracle-working image of Mary.”¹⁴

To better understand them on their own terms, I will approach my primary sources as honest accounts of events, supernatural or otherwise.¹⁵ This paper does not seek to prove any miracles, nor does it seek to disprove them with alternative, secular explanations. It *does* seek to explicate various miracles attested in the primary sources, as my historical subjects might have seen them.

Direct Actions

My main example of a direct-action miracle is Mary’s apparition in 1422. It was recorded in John Kananos’s eyewitness account, “one of [the siege’s] most reliable

¹⁰ Thomas James Dandeleit, *Spanish Rome, 1500-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 66.

¹¹ George-Tvrtkovic, ch. 5.

¹² Paul K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battles: From Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 194.

¹³ Collins Dictionary, s.v. “miracle (*n.*),” accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/miracle>.

¹⁴ Lieth, 99.

¹⁵ This paper was heavily influenced by the “Unbelieved” approach. Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Andrew Redden, and Karin Vélez, “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II: Proposals and Solutions,” *History Compass* 15 (2017): 3-6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12370>.

and interesting sources.”¹⁶ In it, Mary substantiates herself as a “woman wearing violet clothes” who is seen “walking on the breastworks of the outer wall.”¹⁷ Though she does not take up arms, her presence – proof that God is on Constantinople’s side – immediately emboldens the defenders and disheartens the attackers. “At the sight of her figure,” Kananos writes, “darkness, squall, quaking and fear suddenly entered all [the Ottomans’] minds.”¹⁸ In his speeches, the monk Joseph Byrennios (ca. 1350-1430) also attests that Mary’s physical appearance on the walls caused the Ottomans to become fearful.¹⁹

Knowledge of this apparition was widespread and enduring. Having visited Constantinople in 1437 and 1438, Spanish traveller Pero Tafur records the story of “a knight riding around the ramparts on a horse, fully armed” during a siege.²⁰ Though he mixes up key details (such as replacing Mary with an angelic knight) with other popular stories, historians today believe that 1422 was the event in question. The apparition remained a major part of the siege’s story even fifteen years afterwards.²¹ This also compliments one scholar’s suggestion that Kananos’s detailed and exciting account “was orally performed during commemorative celebrations of the liberation of the city.”²² While this miracle

¹⁶ Andrea Massimo Cuomo, *A Critical Edition, With English Translation, Introduction, and Notes of John Kananos’ Account of the Siege of Constantinople In 1422* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), xxxi.

¹⁷ John Kananos, *Account of the Siege of Constantinople In 1422*, trans. and ed. Cuomo in *A Critical Edition*, 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (2005), s.v. “Byrennios, Joseph”; Tatiana V. Kushe, “The Miraculous Salvation of Constantinople From the Ottoman Siege in 1422 as Viewed by the Byzantines,” *Античная древность и средние века* 47 (2019): 215. This is a Russian-language article that I translated digitally. I showed this sentence to two Russian-speaking SFU students, both of whom confirmed that its details match those given in the article. I gratefully dedicate this paper to them both.

²⁰ *Pero Tafur: Travels and Adventures (1435-1439)*, trans. and ed. Malcolm Letts (London: Harper & Brothers, 1926), ch. 20, <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/tafur.html>. This digitization does not contain page numbers.

²¹ Nevra Necipoğlu, *Byzantium Between the Ottomans and the Latins: Politics and Society in the Late Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 190; Alexander Vasiliev, “Pero Tafur: A Spanish Traveller of the Fifteenth Century and His Visit to Constantinople, Trebizond, and Italy,” *Byzantion* 7, no. 1 (1932), 111.

²² Cuomo, lxi.

does record Mary intervening directly, none of the above versions record her *fighting* directly.

The same is true for the one direct-action miracle that I found in an account of 1571. Published within months of the battle, Giovanni Pietro Contarini's narrative records God "miraculously work[ing] the sea" and creating a "steady westerly breeze" in order to give the Catholic League ships an advantage.²³ Alone, these two direct-action miracles would suggest that, while Mary worked toward the same goals as Christian soldieries, she did not work *with* them. However, Kananos, Contarini, and (debatably) Byrennios also record complimentary miracles in which Mary intervenes within the minds of the combatants themselves.

Manipulation of Human Actions

In this category of miracle, Mary directly alters combatants' emotions and capabilities, making for less direct interventions than the above examples. Before mentioning the apparition, Kananos writes of a transformation in the defenders. "The same people who were previously cowardly" suddenly became "courageous, excellent, and brave soldiers, disdainful of blows [and] terrible wounds."²⁴ Taken alone, this miracle could be interpreted secularly as courage born of desperation and the soldiers' desire to defend their homes. However, Kananos immediately follows it with the assertion that "the help of the Panagia [Mary] strengthened [the soldiers'] courage."²⁵ Thus, Mary can be seen as investing the defenders with bravery that they did not naturally possess. A literal reading could also understand "disdainful of blows" as Mary granting them some degree of pain-resistance.

Lepanto's sources attest similar miracles of empowerment. While commemorating the victory in 1572, Pius V mentions Marian miracles only vaguely.²⁶ In 1569, though, he wrote that use of the Rosary in the thirteenth century caused "the faithful [to] become more fervent," "more inflamed by [their]

²³ *From Cyprus to Lepanto: Giovanni Pietro Contarini*, trans. and ed. Kiril Petkov (New York: Italica Press, 2019), 119. Interestingly, Contarini's account credits God rather than Mary with the miracles, suggesting that the common connection between the Rosary, Lepanto, and Our Lady of Victory may have been more spiritually reasonable (or politically useful) than temporally attested.

²⁴ Kananos in Cuomo, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.* "The Panagia" is an Orthodox title for Mary.

²⁶ Pius V, *Salvatoris Domini*, March 5, 1572, trans. Cyril Dore in "The Popes and the Rosary," *Dominicana* 10, no. 2 (September 1925): 18.

prayers,” and to suddenly “bec[o]me different men.”²⁷ Likely, his promotion of the Rosary was intended, at least in part, to harness this same benefit. Therefore, it is also likely that it factored into his understanding of Lepanto. Contarini’s account describes a similarly empowering miracle in which God emboldens the Catholic League soldiers to “bec[o]me one body, one will, and one desire, neither heeding nor fearing death, eager to fight for Jesus Christ.”²⁸

These miracles of empowerment share victories between divine and human actors. In Rome, one December 1572 sermon likened “the tears and prayers of the pope” to Moses’ appeals “to the assistance of heaven” during [Israel’s] battle against the Amalakites in Exodus.²⁹ In the story, the Israelites only “prevailed” whenever Moses held up “the staff of God.”³⁰ It clearly states that the Amalekites are defeated “with the sword,” suggesting that both in Exodus and at Lepanto, some form of divine power was bestowed upon God’s fighting faithful.³¹ One concrete example of belief in Lepanto as a shared victory can be found on the ceiling of Rome’s Santa Maria in Aracoeli church. The work is “dedicated to the Virgin Mother of God in honor of the return of Marcantonio Colonna, Captain General of the Pontifical Fleet.”³²

Marian miracles that empower Christians also imply their opposite: miracles that disempower their enemies. Such miracles exist in the accounts of 1422. Kananos writes that the Ottomans’ “eagerness for battle... fled from them... due to an invisible and divine power” that he attributes to the apparition.³³ One Byzantine Short Chronicle states simply that “The Romans won and several thousand Turks became disoriented,” another affliction that Mary might have induced.³⁴ From there, the Ottoman fear that Byrennios spoke of may have

²⁷ Pius V, *Consueverunt*, September 7, 1569, trans. Dore in “Popes and Rosary,” 18.

²⁸ *Contarini*, 116.

²⁹ Quoted in Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes: From the Close of the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Francis Kerr (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., LTD, 1929), 434.

³⁰ Exodus. 17:8-11 (New Revised Standard Version).

³¹ Exodus. 17:13 (New Revised Standard Version).

³² Quoted in Paul Anderson, “Marcantonio Colonna and the Victory at Lepanto: The Framing of a Public Space at Santa Maria in Aracoeli,” in *Perspectives on Public Space in Rome, From Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Jan Gadeyene and Gregory Smith (London: Routledge, 2016), 137.

³³ Kananos in Cuomo, 39.

³⁴ Quoted in Cuomo, lxx. Cuomo suggests that this disorientation was divine.

actually been mentally inserted rather than naturally instilled upon seeing the apparition.³⁵

Indirect and Ambiguous Actions That Connote Absolute Power

By definition, the miracles referenced within my first two categories “surpass all known human or natural powers.”³⁶ Still, each of those miraculous actions occurred inside of normal spacetime. Mary (and God) did specific things at specific times. This final category includes miracles that occurred outside of such restrictions, with Mary shaping events in unknown (or even unknowable) ways. They are also characterized by a lack of detail.

For example, in his 1571 diary, one Milanese Catholic simply wrote that God “favor[ed] his holy church with the marvelous and unprecedented victory” at Lepanto.³⁷ What does this mean? Possibly, this simple phrasing stands in for any number of the above-described miracles. On 1422, Symeon of Thessalonica writes little beyond noting that Mary “cast down [the Ottomans] and brought them to shame.”³⁸ Alone, this would seem to be a grand statement of Mary’s God-derived, absolute power to shape events. Earlier in his *Logos Historikos*, though, Symeon describes the patron saint of Thessalonica assassinating Ottoman Sultan Mehmed I by driving him “out of his mind with disease” from within a dream – a clear direct-action miracle.³⁹ Thus, the “cast[ing] down” may just be a placeholder for the sorts of miracles described by Kananos.

This ‘placeholder’ explanation fits some sources, but not all. One commemorative inscription for 1571 reads “not our power and arms, nor our leaders, but the Madonna of the Rosary helped us to victory,” explicitly rejecting more temporal sorts of miracles.⁴⁰ One contemporary history briefly notes that

³⁵ Kananos in Cuomo, 39.

³⁶ Collins, “miracle (*n.*)”

³⁷ “Il Diario di Giambattista Casale (1554-1598),” trans. Carlo Marcora, *Memorie Storiche Della Diocesi di Milano* 12, (1965): 257, quoted in Christine Getz, *Mary, Music, and Meditation: Sacred Conversations in Post-Tridentine Milan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 83.

³⁸ Symeon of Thessalonica,” 113.

³⁹ Symeon of Thessalonica,” 111.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Von Pastor, 444.

“with God’s help, [Sultan] Murad [II]’s efforts were rendered fruitless” in 1422.⁴¹ While twenty-first century readers may wonder what exactly the “help” in these two sources was, most fifteenth and sixteenth century Christians likely did not. Indeed, these sources’ lack of detail can be seen as commensurate to their authors’ faith in God’s divine abilities, and Mary’s power to wield them.

Imagine that a Grandmaster beat me in a game of chess. Everyone would take my defeat for granted, no explanation needed. Someone might *choose* to explain my defeat, perhaps to praise the skill of the Grandmaster or to mock my terribleness, no one would find it necessary. And even if the Grandmasters’ strategy was explained, how many people would actually have understood all of its complexities? The same is true for this category of Marian miracles. If Mary is divine and exists outside of our reality, of course she can ensure victory in battle. For believers, then, that Mary had intervened at all likely mattered far more than any specific details – details which mere mortals may not have been able to understand anyways.

Lepanto’s commemorative art also touches on this theme, with “popular images featur[ing] a heavenly Mary presiding over an earthly battle,” perhaps directing soldiers, or even dictating events, from afar.⁴² In Paolo Veronese’s 1572 *The Allegory of Lepanto*, Mary is aloft the cloud-topping heavens, clearly separate from the human events of the battle below.⁴³ From the clouds, light shines down onto the Catholic fleet, contrasting the beams of darkness enshadowing the Ottomans. Light is intangible and allegories contain hidden meaning, further emphasizing Mary’s illusive yet all important role.

Conclusions

As useful as my categorizations have been, it is important to avoid delineating too strictly between types of Marian miracles. To do so would be to impose limitations that clearly did not exist for either my sets of historical subjects. A number of sources (such as Pius V, Kananos, and Contarini) appear in multiple

⁴¹ *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes, 1401-1477*, trans. and ed. Marios Philippides (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 27.

⁴² George-Tvrtkovic, ch. 5.

⁴³ Paolo Veronese, *The Battle of Lepanto*, 1572, oil on canvas, 169 × 137cm, Gallerie dell’Accademia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/88/%28Venice%29_Allegoria_della_battaglia_di_Lepanto_-_Gallerie_Accademia.jpg

sections. Largely, the above accounts remain unencumbered by more restrictive understandings of religion that emerged in this period. Mary's powers were, through God, seen as absolute, and it is unlikely that any of my sources would outright deny the possibility of the miracles described in others.

By the 15th century, Constantinople was "probably little more than a depopulated shell."⁴⁴ The visiting Tafur walked among a "sad and poor" populace.⁴⁵ "Even the palace," he recorded, had degraded to "such a state that both it and the city show well the evils which the people have suffered and still endure."⁴⁶ If Kananos's account was indeed recited in public, Mary's miracles would have reminded the impoverished citizenry of their divine patron's protection and of their city's great history. While 1422 was one of Mary's last interventions as at Constantinople, 1571 was one of her first as Our Lady of Victory. In 1571, Pius V instituted a yearly feast in her commemoration that is still widely celebrated even today, as the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.⁴⁷ Regardless of the details (or lack thereof) of each miracle, what has mattered more over time has clearly been the meaning that has formed around them.

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⁴⁴ Ken Dark, "The Distribution and Density of Occupation in Byzantine Constantinople, 1100-1453," in *Town and Country in the Middle Ages, Contrasts, Contacts and Interconnections, 1100-1500*, ed. Kate Giles and Christopher Dyer (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2005), 7.

⁴⁵ Tafur, ch. 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Von Pastor, 443.

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