

Pagan Cult to Christian Ritual: The Case of Agia Marina Theseiou

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A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER of antiquaries, folklorists, and classicists through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a lesser number to the present day, have shown a penchant for viewing churches, saints, cults, and rites of Byzantine and early modern Greek Orthodox religion as replications of real or supposed pagan Greek counterparts. Cautionary signs of a too zealous approach to the subject of Christianization of pagan cults are long evidentiary gaps, failure to show a process of the transfer of the cult rituals, and a tendency to ignore plausible causes of similarity that are less remote than Classical antiquity and the possibility that similar rituals may be simply analogous but independent responses to universal human concerns.

A strong counter to these writers have been historians who specialize in the Early Christian and Byzantine ages, aware of the evidentiary difficulty and complexity of the transition from paganism to Christianity and of the fact that, even where there is evidence of Christian takeover of pagan religious sites, these actions were usually pragmatic, not ecumenical, and were accompanied more often by exorcism and remodeling than by interest in conversion or the continuation of rituals. The nineteenth century saw occasional skepticism about excessive views of pagan-to-Christian syncretism, such as Carl Wachsmuth's chastisement of Kyriakos Pittakis for "den durchaus mehr patriotischen als überzeugenden Scharfsinn, mit dem das hinter jeder modernen Kapelle versteckte altgriechische Heiligtum entdeckt wird." But it is in the past four decades that more reflective historiography and archaeology have made this

kind of imaginative scholarship less fashionable.¹

Nevertheless, as we shall see, even when claims of specific pagan-to-Christian continuity have been dormant for some time, if not rebutted they are apt to be revived, repeated, and embellished even in the present age of rationalism. Moreover, because there were some unusual but real cases of close continuity in the transformation of pagan shrines into Christian churches, it is necessary, in addition to emphasizing the general history of discontinuity, to deal in detail with individual proposals of the descent of ancient cult on their own merits or demerits.² To that end, this essay will address the early-modern fertility and healing rituals of the Church of Agia Marina in the Theseion district of Athens, rituals that have been the subject of an unusual number of claims of derivation from gods, heroes, nymphs, cults, and shrines of the Classical Greeks. It is necessary here to lay out the specific claims, then to put these claims to tests of evidence and argument, and finally to suggest the alternative possibility that the rituals of Agia Marina had origins unrelated to pagan antiquity.

The Church of Agia Marina Theseiou is situated in the northwest corner of the rocky northeast spur of the Hill of the

¹ C. Wachsmuth, *Die Stadt Athen im Alterthum I* (Leipzig 1874) 84, on K. S. Pittakis, *L'ancienne Athènes* (Athens 1835); for more recent refutations of the view of continuity from paganism to Christianity in Greece and at Athens in particular, see A. Frantz, "From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens," *DOP* 19 (1965) 186–205; J.-M. Speiser, "La christianisation des sanctuaires païens en Grèce," in U. Jantzen (ed.), *Neue Forschungen in griechischen Heiligtümern* (Tübingen 1976) 309–320; C. Mango, "Discontinuity with the Classical Past in Byzantium," in M. Mullet and R. Scott (eds.), *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition* (Birmingham 1981) 48–57; T. Gregory, "The Survival of Paganism in Christian Greece: A Critical Essay," *AJP* 107 (1986) 229–242; O. Dally, "Alte Ritual in neuen Gewand? Zu Fortleben und Umdeutung heidnischer Rituale in der Spätantike," in C. Metzner-Nebelsick (ed.), *Rituale in der Vorgeschichte* (Rahden 2003) 171–181.

² See Gregory, *AJP* 107 (1986) 237–241, for the fact and manner in Athens and the rest of Greece of a few fairly direct transfers of pagan holy places and cults to Christianity; most of even these transitions involve some deconsecration and mutilation of the earlier structures.

Nymphs in western Athens (Figs. 1, 2, 3).³ It is the only significant institution now known to have functioned on this spur since antiquity when the site was occupied by a shrine of Zeus that is evident in a rock-cut *horos* of the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. (*IG I³ 1055A* ἵορος : Διός)⁴ and many architectural cuttings in the bedrock. Before the second half of the nineteenth century the Church of Agia Marina occupied an ancient cave-cistern with a simple façade around its entrance in the northwest scarp of the spur and a small dome (*troullos*) with a conical roof that still stands on the surface of the spur covering the ancient cistern's rock-cut well. Subsequently the church has undergone several major rebuildings, culminating in the large five-domed structure of the Byzantine order dedicated in 1931 (Figs. 2, 3).⁵ This modern building incorporates the early cave-church within its southeast corner as a baptistery (Figs. 2 [dotted outline] and 4).

According to Orthodox hagiography, Agia Marina was martyred at Pisidian Antioch during the reign of Claudius

³ The Hill of the Nymphs, one of the prominences of western Athens (Fig. 1), takes its modern name from the shrine of the Nymphs identified at its summit by a rupestral *horos* of the mid-fifth century B.C. (*IG I³ 1065*, ἵορος | Νυμφ[ῶ]ν | Δέμο). The hill's ancient name is unknown. "Northeast spur" here refers to the hill's extensive lower outcropping of the hard gray limestone bedrock that forms the upper geology of prominent hills in the Plain of Athens. Fig. 2 is an adaptation of the drawing of the spur by the astronomer Julius Schmidt published in E. Curtius, *Sieben Karten zur Topographie von Athen* (Gotha 1868) pl. 7; see also W. Judeich, *Topographie von Athen*² (Munich 1931) Plan I, C-D 5. The spur slopes downward 19.0 meters over its 105.0 meters southwest-to-northeast length. It is popularly called Λόφος της Αγίας Μαρίνας from the Church, while the upper hill is called Λόφος του Αστεροσκοπείου from the Old Observatory of 1842 which crowns its summit. Fig. 3, a photographic view looking northeastward from the Old Observatory, shows in the foreground the bedrock spur with the modern building and old conical-roofed dome (*troullos*) of Agia Marina.

⁴ Legged rho with broken/angled loop, three-barred sigma; retrograde. For the location of the *horos* inscription see Fig. 2:A.

⁵ The church of 1931 is the design of Ernst Ziller as modified by Achilles Georgiades.

Gothicus.⁶ She is throughout the Greek Orthodox Church a patron saint of human fertility, childbirth, and children's health, but special to her church in the Theseion district of Athens have been a fertility/childbirth ritual in which women slid down a sloping rock (τσουλήθρα) on this spur in petition for conception or easy labor, and healing rituals in which sick children were touched to the rock of the early cave-church or brought to the church where their old clothing was exchanged for new.

Since the early nineteenth century, various writers have suggested that these rituals were inspired by, adapted from, or otherwise connected with ancient Greek cults known, or supposed, to have existed on the Hill of the Nymphs. Early travelers give us the first allusions to these rituals and their descent from antiquity. J. L. S. Bartholdy, on visiting the Pnyx in 1803 or 1804, wrote that at the place of ancient healing cults Greek women afflicted with barrenness slide on the great rocks, and others touch their sick infants to the rocks. Edward Dodwell, during his second journey to Greece (1805), observed the ritual of "the sliding rock" in the same region of Athens and noted that women slide on the rock "in order that they may be blessed with numerous progeny of males"⁷—an age-old gender bias, now receding from Greek culture with such enlightenment as the abolition of the dowry. Although these two writers did not mention Agia Marina by name, the proximity of her church to the Pnyx and the peculiarity of the sliding ritual to that church indicate allusion to Agia Marina Theseiou.⁸

⁶ On the life, trials, and iconography of Agia Marina, and particularly her church in Theseion, see E. Tasoulas, *Αγία Μαρίνα* (Athens 1994) 25, 60; I am grateful to Mr. Tasoulas for his scholarly booklet and his gift of the photograph Fig. 4 with permission to publish it.

⁷ J. L. S. Bartholdy, *Voyage en Grèce, fait dans les années 1803 et 1804* I (Paris 1807) 162; E. Dodwell, *A Classical and Topographical Tour through Greece, During the Years 1801, 1805, and 1806* I (London 1819) 406–407; O. F. A. Meinardus, "Fertility and Healing Cult Survivals in Athens: Haghia Marina," *ΣEthnol* 99 (1974) 270–276, at 272–273, cites many later nineteenth-century testimonia about the sliding rock.

⁸ This is an opportune place to clear up an old misunderstanding about

In 1835 Pittakis, publishing the rupestral horos of Zeus on this hillside, assigned the shrine of Herakles Alexikakos to the very site of the cave-church of Agia Marina in the belief that the saint's healing cult commemorated the ancient hero's relief of Athens from plague. Later in the nineteenth century, Bernhard Schmidt filled out our picture of the clothes-changing ritual of healing with the details that the old garments were burned and that it was considered impious to take them away. Well into the second half of the twentieth century there is testimony that Agia Marina was especially a protector of children afflicted with smallpox, and again, as late as 1973, we have the claim of an ancient origin of the healing ritual and an eye-witness account of its practice in front of the cave-become-baptistery at the hour of vespers, when mothers removed the black clothing of their sick children and then dressed them in bright colors.⁹

In another digression in his treatment of the horos of Zeus, Pittakis claimed that in antiquity this rock spur held statues and shrines of a variety of Γενέθλιοι Θεοί, including Eileithyia, Hera, and Artemis—specifically Artemis Λυσιζώνη, so called because post-partum women dedicated their cinctures to her—

the chronology of the healing cult at Agia Marina. According to Pittakis, *ArchEph* 52 (1859) 1882 n.1, before Greek Independence and the de-sanctification of the Church of the Theotokos on the south slope of the Akropolis, mothers took sick children there to be cured, but later they brought them to the church of Agia Marina. August Mommsen, *Athenae Christianae* (Leipzig 1868) 52 n., took this to mean that healing of children was not earlier sought from Agia Marina; but in fact Pittakis was simply noting that Agia Marina assumed the healing functions of the other church when it became defunct. Proof of this is his observation (*Athènes* 461) that the rites of Agia Marina were so old as to commemorate the ancient cult of Herakles Alexikakos on the northeast spur of the Hill of the Nymphs, just as the healing powers of the Theotokos were passed down from a nearby pagan shrine of Artemis Dictynna.

⁹ Pittakis, *Athènes* 461; see also Mommsen, *Athenae* 52; B. Schmidt, *Das Volksleben der Neugriechen und das Hellenische Alterthum* (Leipzig 1871) 81 and 82 n.1. Smallpox: G. A. Megas, *Greek Calendar Customs*² (Athens 1963) 141. 1973: Meinardus, *JEthnol* 99 (1974) 270–271.

and he linked these goddesses to Agia Marina's traditional concern with conception and childbirth.¹⁰

The ritual of the τσουλήθρα may have waxed and waned from one time to another, but its complete cessation was long in coming. Wachsmuth noted that the practice had declined after the mid-nineteenth century because of the inhibiting presence of many foreigners in Athens.¹¹ Still, the ritual is attested by non-Greek writers as late as 1923, an era when Agia Marina's feast on July 17 was said to be the most significant in the Athenian calendar of saints.¹² At some undetermined time after that, the sliding rock was crowned with a concrete terrace—some say to give more table-space for the adjacent Ταβέρνα Βραχάκια, others, more plausibly, that the church added it to thwart a ritual considered ill-suited to modern religion.¹³ In either case, the sliding ritual became passé, and in 1998 the Greek Archaeological Service removed the concrete in the process of refurbishing the site as part of the Unification of Archaeological Sites of Athens. The late decades of the twentieth century brought an apparently more acceptable ritual of the same cult, in which women bring metal votive images (τάματα) of infant children to the icon of Agia Marina and pray for conception.¹⁴

Although sliding on the rock of Agia Marina Theseiou may have ceased by the mid-twentieth century, the opinion that the ritual descended from antiquity has managed to outlive its

¹⁰ Pittakis, *Athènes* 462–463.

¹¹ C. Wachsmuth, *Das alte Griechenland im Neuen* (Bonn 1864) 71.

¹² W. W. Hyde, *Greek Religion and its Survivals* (Boston 1923) 110; on the prominence of the feast see M. Bouyouka and B. Megarides, *Οδωνομικά η Σημασία των Ονομάτων των οδών της Αθήνας* I (Athens 1993) s.v. "Αγίας Μαρίας. Agia Marina's summer fair in the Theseion neighborhood is still very popular though in many features now secular and commercial.

¹³ Apropos of this point, in 1973 Meinardus, *ζEthnol* 99 (1974) 273, found a gentleman of the neighborhood who remembered the use of the slide from fifty years earlier, but the priest and elders of the church said that they were unaware of the ritual.

¹⁴ Meinardus, *ζEthnol* 99 (1974) 270.

practice. In fact, the most detailed linking of the ritual and a pagan shrine is that which Miriam Ervin embedded in her larger thesis and argument that the Nymphs of the shrine at the summit of this hill (marked by the rupestral horos *IG I³ 1065*) were the Hyakinthides or Geraistai Nymphai Genethliai, heroized patronesses of fertility, the newborn, and children.¹⁵ As a corollary of this identification, Ervin suggested a distant but direct connection of these Nymphs with Agia Marina—a variation on the theme of earlier scholars, but in this case the ancient shrine is both real and discovered. While conceding the need for care in linking pagan and Christian rites, Ervin asserted that Agia Marina, as the patron saint of childbirth in the Eastern Church, was the logical successor to the ancient fertility cult of the Hyakinthid Nymphs and added that it was not coincidental that Agia Marina established her church on this hill. This barely hedged claim of continuity has attracted enough scholarly adherents to warrant close attention in the following examination.¹⁶

A rebuttal to claims of the ancient origin of the rituals of Agia Marina may begin with the general point that, since it is

¹⁵ M. Ervin, “Geraistai Nymphai Genethliai and the Hill of the Nymphs: A Problem of Athenian Mythology and Topography,” *Πλάτων* 11 (1959) 146–159; the Geraistai Nymphai Genethliai are known, before the lexicographers, from a single inscribed altar of ca. 400 B.C. (*IG II² 4547*) found in Phaleron near the Kephisos River and dedicated to these Nymphs and other gods connected with childbirth and the care of children. For a thorough treatment of the eponymous shrine on the Hill of the Nymphs, see U. Kron, “Demos, Pnyx und Nymphenhügel: zu Demos-Darstellungen und zum ältesten Kultort des Demos in Athen,” *AthMitt* 94 (1979) 49–75.

¹⁶ Ervin, *Πλάτων* 11 (1959) 157 n.52. T. Hadzisteliou Price, “Double and Multiple Representations in Greek Art and Religious Thought,” *JHS* 91 (1971) 48–69, at 50, accepted Ervin’s identification of the Nymphs as probable; R. E. Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens* (Princeton 1978) 188, favored both the identification and the association with Agia Marina; Kron, *AthMitt* 94 (1979) 67 n.92, while doubting the identification of the Nymphs, allowed that the sliding rock may go back to ancient use under the patronage of the Nymphs (Kron, “Heilige Steine,” in *Kotinos: Festschrift für Erika Simon* [Mainz 1992] 56–70, at 65–66).

certain that pagan cults did not endure beyond the early sixth century, the plausibility of these claims hinges on the chronology of Agia Marina, or at least of Christian worship at this site.¹⁷ That is, continuity requires that the associated pagan and Christian cults must have overlapped or existed in close temporal proximity. To put this assertion as a question: What, from the evidence of literature, iconography, and archaeology, is the earliest verifiable attestation of the Church of Agia Marina Theseiou?

The investigation of this chronology should address first a small group of explicit assertions of early Christian worship at this site that have influenced some of the claims cited above. On 3 May 1946 John Travlos, in an unpublished lecture to the Christian Archaeological Society of Athens, named Agia Marina Theseiou among Athenian churches of the mid-fifth to the mid-sixth century of the Christian era, an assertion twice reiterated in print.¹⁸ These publications, however, adduced no evidence, and the subsequent investigations by Alison Frantz of Athenian antiquities between A.D. 267 and 700 led her to include Agia Marina, with reference to Travlos's publications, among "the churches for which no satisfactory evidence of their existence remains or which are now seen to be too late to qualify for inclusion in the present volume."¹⁹ One can only

¹⁷ Frantz, *DOP* 19 (1965) 197, 201, has noted that Justinian's closing of the Athenian philosophical schools in 529 is good evidence that intellectual and, to some extent, religious paganism was still alive to that point and that in the prosperous prior century Athens was a place of coexistence as the religious balance gradually shifted to Christianity.

¹⁸ See E. P. Blegen, "News Items from Athens," *AJA* 50 (1946) 373–374, for a summary of Travlos's lecture and his map of Athens (pl. XXX) with claimed early churches; later, Travlos (*Πολεοδομική Έξέλιξις τῶν Ἀθηνῶν, ἀπὸ τῶν Προϊστορικῶν Χρόνων μεχρὶ τῶν Ἀρχῶν τοῦ 19ου Αἰῶνος* [Athens 1960] 142) included Agia Marina among Athenian churches in the period A.D. 408–565 and stated (*Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ Ἡθικὴ Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* I [Athens 1962] 729 s.v. Ἀθῆναι: Χριστιανικαὶ Ἀθῆναι) that Christians very early used the cave-cistern as a church.

¹⁹ A. Frantz, *Agora XXIV Late Antiquity: A.D. 267–700* (Princeton 1988) 72 n.107.

conclude that Travlos's chronology of Agia Marina Theseiou was inferred simply from the apparent antiquity of the cave-cistern and the much later evidence of its use as a church. Frantz's findings do serious damage to all claims of the descent of Agia Marina's rituals from pagan cult, and particularly to those of Ervin and Meinardus, who at the early end of the chronological gap based their leap from the ancient nymphs to Agia Marina on Travlos's chronology.²⁰

A broader view of the chronology than the negation of Travlos's assertions, but also a view that more than corroborates that negative finding, may be had from a survey backward through time of the evidence for Christian worship at the site of Agia Marina. This survey will also document the relevant evolution of the form of the church. The earliest written allusions to the church, by Bartholdy and Dodwell, have already been mentioned. Pictorial and archaeological evidence tends to confirm Frantz's skepticism about its antiquity. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs show two significant structural phases of the church preceding the modern edifice of 1931. Among the earliest is that taken by the pioneer French photographer Félix Bonfils during a visit to Athens in 1868 or 1875. His panoramic view of Athens from the summit of the Hill of the Nymphs (Fig. 5) shows in the foreground the whitewashed *troullos* with bell housing and, just to the north of it, a crude peaked roof of tiles that sits tent-like directly on the rock and extends northward, awkwardly propped over the cave entrance as a porch.²¹ From the following three decades,

²⁰ Ervin, *Πλάτων* 11 (1959) 157 and n.51, where the citation should be "Travlos in E. P. Blegen 1946." Meinardus (*JEthnol* 99 [1974] 271 and n.8) erred in another direction by attributing to Blegen Travlos's notion that the cave of Agia Marina was already a Christian church in the Justinianic period.

²¹ I thank Evi Antonatos for permission to publish this photograph, which has since appeared in E. Antonatos, M. Mauzy, and the M. G. Tsangaris Collection, *Early Photographic Panoramas of Greece* (Athens 2003) 22–23. The bell-housing on the *troullos*, part of a remodeling not long after 1841, coexisted with a later crude, free-standing campanile on the east side of the peaked-roof phase of the church: see Antonatos and Mauzy 28–29 for a

photographs taken from the Old Observatory on the summit of the Hill of the Nymphs and northwestward from the Akropolis show a structure similar to that seen by Bonfils but considerably improved to a walled, split-level plan of rectangular narthex with peaked tile roof projecting northward from the rock and connected on its south side to a lower rectangular sanctuary with a similar peaked roof.²² This north-south axis is a departure from the usual west-east orientation of Greek Orthodox churches but not uncommon when alignment is dictated by terrain, in this case the north-facing mouth of the cave.²³ Nevertheless, the inside of the cave includes a rock-cut shelf or platform on the east side, which appears to be a feature of the ancient cistern but may also have been the place of the *iconostasis* and *bema* when the church was simply the cave with its *troullos* (Fig. 6).²⁴

Some pre-photographic illustrations of the Church of Agia Marina are at least as old as the travelogues of Bartholdy and Dodwell, and one probable glimpse is much older. To start with the last, most seventeenth-century views of Athens west of the Turkish city wall reveal no architecture recognizable as

view ca. 1900–1902 by an unknown photographer. Also *Athens 1839–1900: A Photographic Record* (Benaki Museum: Athens 1985) no. 537 (Rhomaides); the bell on the *troullos* is seen in photos as late as 1931 (Fig. 3), but decades ago both bell systems gave way to that of the modern church.

²² See e.g. *Athens 1839–1900* no. 537; Kron, *AthMitt* 94 (1979) pl. 7:2; Antonatos and Mauzy, *Panoramas* 28–31 nos. 6 and 7.

²³ Cf. the similar but opposite south-north direction of the Church of the Theotokos (Panagia Chrysospiliotissa) in the cave on the south slope of the Akropolis above the Theatre of Dionysos and immediately behind the Thrasyllos monument (Mommsen, *Athenae* 29–30 no. 28; J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* [New York/Washington 1971] 562–563 and fig. 704).

²⁴ A. Xyngopoulos, “Μνημεία τῶν Βυζαντινῶν Ἀθηνῶν καὶ τῆς Τουρκοκρατίας,” in *Εὐρετήριον τῶν Μνημείων τῆς Ἑλλάδος I Εὐρετήριον τῶν Μεσαιωνικῶν Μνημείων 1 Ἀθηνῶν* part 2 (Athens 1929) 105, has noted that the later extension of the church to the north (the peaked-roof phase) was a change from the original orientation of the simple cave-church; see also H. Koilakou, “Θησείου· Αγία Μαρίνα,” *ArchDelt* 36 (1981) Chron. 79–80.

part of the church, but these images are highly schematic and may simply have ignored small structures.²⁵ Probably exceptional is a watercolor in the Benaki Museum at Athens entitled “The Bombardment of the Parthenon, 1687,” a southward panorama of the city depicting Morosini’s cannonade of the Akropolis from the Hill of the Muses.²⁶ A small, isolated cylindrical structure depicted on a hill between the Venetian batteries and the Hephaisteion is roughly consistent in location and shape with the small *troullos* that stands to this day just a few meters south of the modern church building.

The earliest certain depictions of the *troullos* of Agia Marina detected by the present author are two sketches made by Sir William Gell during a visit to Athens in 1801–1802 or 1805–1806.²⁷ Ferdinand Stademann, known for the thoroughness and accuracy of his art and its commentary, published in 1841 an engraved panorama of Athens looking east from atop the Hill of the Nymphs which shows in the foreground not only the *troullos*, shabby in the aftermath of the War of Independence, but also, just to the north of it, a small masonry-roofed cleft in the rock, which Stademann’s notes identify as the entrance to

²⁵ E.g., H. A. Omont, *Catalogue des manuscrits grecs de Fontainebleau* (Paris 1889) pl. xlii.3, drawing by C. Magni (1688) after J. Spon (1678), which shows only the Temple of Hephaistos in this area; an engraving of Athens ca. 1700 in the Benaki Museum (no. 22955) shows a number of small structures southwest of the Hephaisteion, but none recognizable as the *troullos* of Agia Marina.

²⁶ Benaki Museum no. 23149, reproduced in *Athens from the End of the Ancient Era to Greek Independence* (Greek Ministry of Culture: Athens 1985) 63 no. 131; the unsigned painting has been attributed to G. M. Verneda, one of Morosini’s engineers.

²⁷ William Gell, n.d. book no. 8, sketch no. 39, *obverse*, entitled “View from the Areopagus,” and book no. 5, no. 23, a view of the Akropolis from the north: see L. Binyon, *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists and Artists of Foreign Origin Working in Great Britain Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum II* (London 1900). I am grateful to the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum, for making the sketchbooks available for study.

the “unterirdische Felsen-Kirche” of Agia Marina (Fig. 7).²⁸ Théodose du Moncel’s engraving of 1843 from a more north-westerly point of view (Fig. 8) shows in detail the cave-church’s early narthex-façade and small northeast entrance-stairway,²⁹ and the same structure appears in Harald C. Stilling’s drawing of 1853.³⁰ Compared with the earlier view of Stademann, these two show that the *troullos* has been repaired, painted, and augmented with a bell-housing on the eastern side of its conical roof.³¹

Thus iconography and literature indicate a Church of Agia Marina Theseiou at least as early as 1801–1806 and perhaps as early as the Turkish-Venetian battle of 1687. However, thanks to work and publication in the 1980’s by the First Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities of the Greek Archaeological Service, we have evidence of Christian worship in the cave considerably earlier than the seventeenth century, evidence that also provides much more light for investigation of the claims that ancient cults of fertility, childbirth, and healing were passed on or recollected in the rituals of Agia Marina Theseiou. Examining parts of the interior of the cave down to its bedrock surfaces, the Greek archaeologists found physical evidence of altars and an *iconostasis*, but also, and more significant for the chronology of the church, five layers of wall painting from six periods.³² The third layer from the top had frescoes datable by

²⁸ F. Stademann, *Panorama von Athen* (Munich 1841) 26–27 (no. 10), 46 (notes on pl. 10, points 42 and 43); see also an 1835 engraving by Megelin in E. Stasinopoulou, *Οθωνική Αθήνα* (Athens, n.d.) 33.

²⁹ Th. du Moncel, *De Venise à Constantinople à travers la Grèce* (Paris 1843); the engraving is reproduced in K. Biris, *Αί Ἀθήναι ἀπὸ τοῦ 19ου εἰς τὸν 20ου Αἰῶνα* (Athens 1966) 84–85.

³⁰ Harald C. Stilling, *Arkitekt Harald Conrad Stilling: dagbogsblade og tegninger fra Athen 1853* (Copenhagen 1985) 41 (Kunstakademiet inv. no. 17700).

³¹ Cf. H. Koilakou, “Ναός Αγίας Μαρίνας Θησείου,” *ArchDelt* 39 (1984) Chron. 60.

³² Koilakou, *ArchDelt* 36 (1981) Chron. 79–80 and pls. 26–28; Koilakou, “Ναός Αγίας Μαρίνας Θησείου,” *ArchDelt* 37 (1982) Chron. 75 and pl. 32:a; Koilakou, “Ναός Αγίας Μαρίνας Θησείου,” *ArchDelt* 38 (1983) Chron. 68 and

style to the thirteenth century, but earlier painting on the lower layers was not well enough preserved to be dated.³³ The figure of Agia Marina was not among the recovered images of Christ, the Virgin, prophets, and saints, but these are only a part of the original tableaux. The discovery of sherds of the Classical period above the cave's lowest floor covering of hydraulic cement verified Travlos's earlier opinion that the cave had been an ancient cistern. Nevertheless, the archaeological reports cite no stratified evidence in the floor of Christian activity earlier than the thirteenth-century frescoes.³⁴ In sum, even though its frescoes make Agia Marina of Theseion one of the earliest, if not the earliest, church of that saint in Greece,³⁵ there is so far no evidence of Christian worship here that is at all close to antiquity.

The discoveries of the Byzantine Ephorate, as well as logic, refute another old claim that had significant but indefinite implications about the antiquity of the church, namely, that the *troullos* was an addition to the original cave church.³⁶ The archaeologists found that the original cistern floor slopes inward to its center where there is a circular depression about forty centimeters deep and a meter in diameter. This central depression, currently covered by the church's baptismal font, is

pls. 31:b, 32; Koikalou, *ArchDelt* 39 (1984) Chron. 63 and pl. 20:a. In 1998 restored sections of the frescoes were on display in the cave-baptistery of the church and in the office of the church's protopresbyter, Father Emmanuel P. Servos. I thank him for sharing with me his knowledge of the church.

³³ Koilakou, *ArchDelt* 39 (1984) Chron. 63 and pl. 20:a.

³⁴ Koilakou, *ArchDelt* 39 (1984) Chron. 60 and pl. 17:a; A. Papageorgiou-Venetas, *Athens: The Ancient Heritage and the Historic Cityscape in a Modern Metropolis* (Athens 1994) 313; Travlos, *Πολεοδομική* 142.

³⁵ Tasoulas, *Αγία Μαρίνα* 60–62; see also his thorough review (27–52) of the iconography of Agia Marina, which shows nothing earlier than the dated frescoes of the cave-church.

³⁶ Xyngopoulos, in *Εύρετήριον* 104 (figs. 131–132), 105 (because he wrote of the cave only as a church, and not an ancient cistern, I take his phrase τὸ ἀρχικὸν κτίσμα as a reference to the first church); see also Koilakou, *ArchDelt* 36 (1981) Chron. 79.

positioned directly beneath the circular well cut through to the cave from the surface of the bedrock spur (see Fig. 6). Since the cave had no spring, and, as the frescoes indicate, its surrounding bedrock is of a fairly impermeable sort, this well and the central depression in the floor must have been the ancient system by which rain water was channeled to the cistern and by which attendants drew water for the cult rituals of Zeus on the plateau of the spur without having to negotiate its steep northern precipice—there is no evidence of a rock-cut stairway—and enter the mouth of the cave-cistern.³⁷ Furthermore, the great industry of excavating this well through hard bedrock is consistent with the mass of ancient rock cuttings on this spur and not with any phase of church construction. Finally, since the well is as old as the cistern, and although we lack iconographic evidence of the *troullos* before the seventeenth century, this dome in some form would have to be as old as the use of the cave as a church, for, while it served sometimes as a bell-housing and always as a light well, it was above all necessary to keep water from flowing into the church.

Ultimately, then, skepticism about Agia Marina inheriting the role of the nymphs or other ancient cultic entities arises from the great chronological gap between antiquity and the first evidence of the church. Ervin proved correct in writing that the church was probably older than the engravings and writings of the early nineteenth century, for the subsequent excavation showed that the earliest datable evidence of its use as a church is its thirteenth-century frescoes and that there were frescoes of earlier but uncertain date.³⁸ Even though Christianity took time to catch on in Athens, and the baleful edicts of Theodosius I in A.D. 392 and 395 prohibiting all pagan rites, and of his grandson Theodosius II in 438 calling for the destruction of all pagan shrines, were slow in taking

³⁷ After the excavation of the floor of the cave, Koilakou, *ArchDelt* 39 (1984) Chron. 60, and Tasoulas, *Αγία Μαρίνα* 60–62, clearly understood this to be the ancient system.

³⁸ Ervin, *Πλάτων* 11 (1959) 157; Koilakou, *ArchDelt* 36 (1981) Chron. 79–80.

effect and, to a fair extent, ignored,³⁹ still it is doubtful that the worship of the Nymphs on the summit of this hill or other pagan cults could have long survived the early sixth century. In the early fifth century Athenian Christianity is represented by symbols on gravestones, lamps, and pottery, but the first clear evidence of church building appears only around the second quarter of that century.⁴⁰ At the site of Agia Marina, however, there is no evidence of Christian activity from so remote antiquity or from many centuries thereafter. That the cave church had undatable layers of fresco below those of the thirteenth century may tempt one to cite the old adage that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” but invoking that argument for an evidentiary gap of approximately 800 years should not be taken seriously. Therefore, a fair summation of the chronological evidence is that it allows no credible claim of the antiquity of Christian worship at the site of the Church of Agia Marina, nor, a fortiori, any claim that its rituals were continuations from ancient Greek cult.

While this great chronological void in the evidence is all the proof needed against a claim of the descent from antiquity of the healing and fertility rituals of Agia Marina, the two-century tradition of such claims shows other features that add to the gravamen against continuity in this case: a priori assertions and repetitions, elaborations of quaint novelty, and manifest contradictions that are more characteristic of folklore than logical investigation.

The claims of Pittakis are examples of nearly and wholly a priori reasoning. He stated that the ancient shrine of Herakles Alexikakos stood on the very site of the cave-church of Agia Marina but offered no archaeological evidence. In citing the scholion to Aristophanes *Frogs* 501 concerning the plague in Athens and the location of the shrine of Herakles Alexikakos in the deme Melite (ἐν Μελίτῃ ἐστὶν ἐπιφανέστατον ἱερὸν Ἡρακλέους ἀλεξικάκου) he had a modicum of real evidence for

³⁹ *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.12–13, 25; on the slow effects of the edict of Theodosius II, especially in Athens, see Frantz, *DOP* 19 (1965) 187–188.

⁴⁰ Frantz, *Agora* 68–69, 72–73.

associating the Herakleion with this area—which is by nearly all accounts in Melite—but not with Agia Marina specifically.⁴¹ Clearly Pittakis' case for the latter association rested mainly on the proposed proximity of the shrine of the hero-god to that of the saint and the fact that both had healing cults, for immediately after claiming that the Herakleion was here, he invoked the modern practice of mothers bringing their sick children to the church and after the liturgy exchanging their old clothing for new, described as a remembrance of the therapy of Herakles Alexikakos.⁴² As for his assigning to this spur the statues and shrines of multiple Γενέθλιοι Θεοί, again Pittakis offered no archaeological evidence other than uninscribed and unspecified beddings in the rock. In fact, his litany of childbirth goddesses is a good example of the creative topography that elicited the impatience of Wachsmuth cited above, and one can only explain it in terms of his accompanying observation that “still” in his time the local women who wish to have children come to Agia Marina and slide down the rock.⁴³ Here the problem is not just the presumed continuity of ancient and modern cults, but that the existence of the ancient cults is actually inferred from the modern.

Also casting doubt on the reportage of the sliding ritual and its connection to antiquity are several uniquely attested and quaint nineteenth-century embellishments of the tradition. F. C. H. L. Pouqueville, then French Consul General to Ali Pasha

⁴¹ I am preparing for publication a detailed version of an argument about the location of the Herakleion that was introduced briefly in a paper at the national meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (“Where was the Shrine of Herakles Alexikakos?” [Philadelphia 2002], abstract *A7A* 106 [2002] 297).

⁴² Pittakis, *Athènes* 461: “Un souvenir des anciens usages pratiqués dans ce temple [of Herakles] s’est conservé jusqu’à ce jour.” See also Mommsen, *Athenae* 52; Schmidt, *Volsleben* 81 and 82 n.1.

⁴³ Pittakis, *Athènes* 462–463: “Dans cette colline on voit beaucoup de places destinées aux statues qui appartaient aux divinités nommées Γενέθλιοι Θεοί.” Pittakis probably mistook for statue beddings the many rock-cut platforms on this spur that were more likely settings for votives in the shrine of Zeus.

of Ioannina, is our sole source for the detail that the women, while sliding down the rock, uttered a “magical formula” in 15-syllable meter, Ἐλάτε μοῖραι τῶν μοιρῶν νὰ μοίρατε κ’ ἐμένα (Come, allotters of destinies, and fulfill my destiny too).⁴⁴ Lord Denison claimed that in antiquity pregnant women, after sacrificing to Diana as Lucina, bathed in a scooped-out rock below the church and then, like their later Christian counterparts, slid down the rock in order to have a successful confinement;⁴⁵ and Bayard Taylor, from his visit to the site in 1858, reported that pregnant women believed that they could learn the sex of their unborn children from the inclination of their own bodies to the right or left as they slid down the rock.⁴⁶

Another common feature of the written tradition of the sliding rock that betrays want of investigation and thus casts further doubt on claims of ancient origin is that reporters have long and often been vague or mistaken about the location of

⁴⁴ F. C. H. L. Pouqueville, *Voyage de la Grèce*² V (Paris 1827) 67 and n.2; the use of the plural μοῖραι rings more of classics than folklore. μοῖρα survives in Byzantine and modern Greek as a word for fate or destiny, but, if this were a Christian prayer, we might expect a common construction like μοῖρα θεοῦ (see E. Κριaras, *Λεξικό Μεσαιωνικῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Δημώδους Γραμματείας* [Thessaloniki 1968–1997] s.v. μοῖρα). Still, that deficiency and the ancient form and unusual accent of μοίρατε may be more metri gratia than classicism. The problems of classicism and accent are solved if we accept the suggestion of David Jordan (personal communication) that Pouqueville may have mistranscribed what the women were really saying: Ἐλάτε, μοῖραι τῶν μηρῶν, νὰ μύρατε κ’ ἐμένα (Come, destiny of thighs [the locus of childbirth], weep for [i.e., have mercy on] me too).

⁴⁵ A. Denison, *Wanderings in Search of Health* (London 1849) 90. Perhaps related to Denison’s tale is the belief relayed by one of Meinardus’s informants (*JEthnol* 99 [1974] 273) that ancient nymphs bathed and washed their clothes in a rock hollow on this hill. The idea of a bath, if it was not a distorted reference to the cave-cistern, may have come from a deep rectangular pit about thirty meters northwest of the τσουλήθρα; but I think that its ancient use may have been as an *apothetes* for decommissioned votives from the shrine of Zeus.

⁴⁶ B. Taylor, *Travels in Greece and Russia with an Excursion to Crete* (New York 1868) 36.

this miraculous slide. Earliest and most severely misdirected is Pouqueville's noting the sliding rock in the context of his visit to the Kallirrhoe fountain on the Ilissos river southeast of the Akropolis. As all other testimonia about the sliding rock are associated with Agia Marina Theseiou, it is most probable that Pouqueville, knowing of the sliding ritual from hearsay, confused the nymph cult of Kallirrhoe, whose rituals were of a different sort, with the eponymous cult of the Hill the Nymphs.⁴⁷ Mary Hamilton referred vaguely to women sliding on "the great sloping rock in front of the church." Meinardus in 1973 speaks of the "destruction of the sliding rock" and its being "partly covered by the new Church of St. Marina and buried under concrete."⁴⁸ In fact, it is clear from old engravings that the banks of the spur over which the modern church was built were always rough and precipitous and thus not suited for the sliding ritual. Meinardus's mention of concrete must come from garbled information about the cementing over of the actual sliding rock.

The rock, however, is not at all changed or missing, and its location can be confidently known from two nineteenth-century eye-witnesses who agree on the spot. The astronomer Julius Schmidt, who for many years directed the observatory at the summit of the hill and drew the first plan of its northeast rock spur, and Ferdinand Stademann, an engraver and commentator renowned for his accuracy, located this "Rutschstein" at the southeast corner of the spur, nearly its farthest point from the church.⁴⁹ This distance does not dissociate the rock

⁴⁷ Kallirrhoe: Judeich, *Topographie* 194–196 and Plan I, H 7; the nymphs of Kallirrhoe were mainly concerned with bridal lustrations (*Etyim.Magn.* s.v. Ἐννεάκρουνος; Harp. and Phot. s.v. λουτροφόρος, λουτροφορεῖν; cf. Dem. 44.18, 30; Poll. 8.66), though Thucydides (2.15.4–5) adds "and other sacred rites."

⁴⁸ M. Hamilton, *Greek Saints and their Festivals* (Edinburgh/London 1910) 59; Meinardus, *ζEthnol* 99 (1974) 273.

⁴⁹ See Fig. 2 and Schmidt's notation "Rutschstein" in the southeast corner of the spur; also Stademann, *Panorama* 26–27 (no. 10), 46 (note on pl. 10, point 44).

from the church, for the place designated in Julius Schmidt's drawing is arguably the only one on the rugged hillside with slope and smoothness suitable for sliding, and in any case the entire rock spur has long been called the Hill of Agia Marina.

A final questionable commonplace about the sliding rock is that it is highly slippery or polished from many centuries of use. Dodwell is the earliest instance, reporting from his visit in 1805 that sliding on the rock is "so much in fashion that its surface has taken on a beautiful polish." Crediting Dodwell, Ervin went further, suggesting that Agia Marina could not have been the initiator of this cult, implying that the rock was so smooth that the ritual of sliding must have gone on since antiquity, and finally stating explicitly that "the most obvious conclusion is that they were Nymphai Genethliai, the Hyakinthides, who gave to Agia Marina her rock."⁵⁰ No evidence so far has come to light of ancient rock-sliding as a fertility ritual, but on a more scientific point, there are no empirical grounds for the claims of a polished rock or the inference of antiquity.⁵¹ The sliding rock today is not polished, as are, for example, some Archaic rock-cut steps that for centuries led ancient pilgrims up the south bank of this spur to the horos and shrine of Zeus. It would take an incredible host of hopeful or expectant women to bring polish to this hard limestone, but once polished, it would not lose that polish, even from generations of non-use. In short, the surface of the rock shows no effect of the sliding, let alone the wear of 1300 or more years. Those who have written that the *τσουλήθρα* was polished either have not observed it or have

⁵⁰ Dodwell, *Tour* 406; Ervin, *Πλάτων* 11 (1959) 158. Others: W. Turner, *Journal of a Tour in the Levant I* (London 1820) 332, visiting the area of the Pnyx in 1814, wrote that the rock was as "slippery as glass" and that the custom of sliding was said to be ancient; Denison, *Wanderings* 90; Taylor, *Travels* 36. This tradition that the rock is "highly polished and slippery from long wear" is cited without question almost to the present day: J. Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford 2001) 131.

⁵¹ Meinardus, *ΣEthnol* 99 (1974) 274, followed Ervin in believing that the rock-sliding ritual of Agia Marina must have been transferred from pre-Christian to Christian cult, but he added his own opinion that this transfer was facilitated by Old Testament metaphors of God as Rock.

exaggerated what is only a naturally less rugged surface than many other parts of the spur.

A close look at the evidence for ancient origins of the rituals of Agia Marina exposes also some spatial gaps, even if they are not as severe as the temporal gap. So Ervin's association of the rituals of Agia Marina with the namesakes of the Hill of the Nymphs:⁵² if the Christian saint were the direct successor to these nymphs, we might expect her church to have been founded nearer than eighty meters from their shrine at the summit of the hill. That nymphs were sometimes associated with caves and that the devotion to Agia Marina here started in a cave are not enough; the nymphs at the summit of the hill had their shrine not in a cave but on a rock outcropping, and we have no evidence that their *temenos* or worship extended to caves farther down the hill. Since evidence that the ancient cave cistern was also a pagan shrine might slightly enhance the claimed association of Agia Marina with ancient Greek cult, one must go back to 1871 and consider Bernhard Schmidt's vaguely cited niches cut in the rock of the cave-church and his assertion that these were remnants of an ancient shrine.⁵³

On the outer terrace of the present church building at its southeast side, where the modern building connects to the cave, a large niche is cut in the vertical scarp of the rock 1.20 meters above the terrace floor. The size of this cutting is more typical of niches in Christian shrines than their verified ancient counterparts, and remnants within it of candles and burning show that it is still a place of devotion to Agia Marina because of its proximity to the church. A visit inside the modern church

⁵² Since many nymphs were associated with fertility, childbirth, childcare, and healing, we need not assess here Ervin's specific identification of the Nymphs of the hilltop shrine as the Hyakinthides or Geraistai Nymphai Genethliai. It is worth noting, however, that Roman and Byzantine antiquarian familiarity with the Hyakinthides of classical myth is not evidence that rituals of these or other nymphs were transferred to the Christian church (*pace* Ervin, *Πλάτων* 11 [1959] 151).

⁵³ Schmidt, *Volkleben* 81 n.4; even the skeptical Wachsmuth (*Stadt* 55) accepted this as an example of reasoned identification.

and examination of the cave-baptistry from outside its low fence found no evidence of Schmidt's niches. There are two small, crude, very shallow recesses on the upper façade of the cave, but they look more like damage or natural erosion than the kind of neat, deeply cut ancient rupestral niches that can be seen at the shrine of Zeus Hypsistos on the Pnyx or that of Eros and Aphrodite on the north slope of the Akropolis. Frescoed plaster is the sole visible covering of the interior walls of the cave, except that low on the west interior wall is a shallow, roughly rectangular recess approximately sixty centimeters high by forty wide and not more than four deep. This recess also looks like no ancient votive niche, but rather a shallow setting for an icon. It is also improbable that construction of the modern church building covered or obliterated niches, for there is no sign of them in the nineteenth-century engravings of the cave-church. Most telling on this point, however, is the Byzantine Ephoreia's report of Classical sherds at the lowest level of the cistern, a report that includes no evidence that the facility was an ancient shrine.

In short, the general circumstances that caves and fountain houses were sometimes considered the haunts of nymphs and that this one supplied water for the ancient shrine and rituals of Zeus on the surface of the rock spur say little about the ancient sanctity of this cistern. As a final counter to the idea that Agia Marina and her rituals of human fertility and pediatrics are descended from nymphs, it must be noted that, where the Early Christian and Byzantine traditions give evidence of the syncretism of pagan spirits, and particularly nymphs, they are usually transferred to the new faith as demonic rather than holy entities.⁵⁴

The burden of proof that the rituals of Agia Marina descended from ancient cult rests with those who have made this claim, and we have seen that they have failed to prove their case. Although this paper has been devoted primarily to arguing this negative point, it is possible to add another, more positive, axis of counter-argument. To some extent the zeal to

⁵⁴ See the summary account and sources in Larson, *Nymphs* 61–64.

find pagan-to-Christian religious continuity diverts investigators from the exploration of other possible explanations of Christian ritual that are less distant in time, sometimes more distant in location, or simply the result of a human intuition to respond to universal problems with common, logical forms of ritual. While these alternative explorations may also produce no definitive conclusions, they can in some cases be more plausible and less afflicted with great chronological voids of evidence. Agia Marina had her own tradition in Christian hagiography that is old and detailed enough that she needs no ancient pagan forerunner. Her universal patronage of women and children is an understandable development from the tradition of her martyrdom as a young woman at Antioch in Pisidia in the third century.

Even if it should be thought that a virgin-martyr is ill-suited to a cult of conception and childbearing,⁵⁵ Meinardus himself brought up a plausible explanation, though he did not see it as an alternative to his pagan precursors of Agia Marina's rituals. He suggested that the Antiochene saint has been conflated with another Saint Marina, an eighth-century "woman-monk" of the non-Chalcedonian and Maronite churches.⁵⁶ Although this saint is named Maria in the Greek Orthodox Church, she does have some attributes seen in the Orthodox Marina, such as a caring relationship with a child and grappling with the devil. This explanation of syncretism of the attributes of saints within Christianity itself has two immediate and considerable advantages over supposed origins in ancient Greek cult: it does not involve so great a chronological reach, and it does not have

⁵⁵ Her patronage of children is a probable reflection of her young age at martyrdom. We should not be surprised that powers of healing and fertility should attach to a virgin martyr. Age-old hagiographic traditions often exhibit a kind of dualism or anti-logic. Without suggesting with Pittakis that Artemis was one of the prototypes of Agia Marina, it is a good analogy that she too was a virgin who oversaw pregnancy and childbirth. One could cite many such paradoxes from the classical pantheon and the Christian saints. Saint Macarius, for example, whose asceticism was distinguished by a life-long diet of raw vegetables, is the patron of cooks and confectioners.

⁵⁶ Meinardus, *JEthnol* 99 (1974) 274–275.

to deal with the difficult historical fact that purification and demonizing were the common, even necessary, Christian approaches to pagan shrines and cults. Still, there remains the contention implicit in the views of Meinardus and others that, although Agia Marina's patronage of women and children may have come from within Christian hagiographic tradition, the specific rituals of rock-sliding and clothes-changing at her church in Theseion are descended from local pagan rites. Although one might dismiss this contention out of hand as transgressing the law of economy of hypotheses, looking also into later traditions for explanation of these rituals may again yield more positive results.

The fertility ritual of rock-sliding, even though it seems peculiar to the cult of Agia Marina in Theseion, may have explanations more likely than a local, ancient pagan precedent. Since the bedrock spur where the church stands is an impressive topographical feature, working it into the rituals of the resident saint was probably an easy intuition, and sliding, involving as it does some of the same anatomy as conception and childbirth, was a natural way to make connection with the believed holiness of the place. Moreover, when one looks farther afield, one finds remarkably similar forms of this magical lithic tribadism in the early modern era at a number of Islamic and Christian sites in the eastern Mediterranean region.⁵⁷ It is easily conceivable, especially in the great cultural interchanges of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, that this ritual, like the saint herself, found its way to Athens well into post-antique times. There need not even have been overt phallicism in the rock-sliding at Agia Marina as there is in some of the kindred rituals elsewhere, for the saint's fertile power could be easily

⁵⁷ Again the resourceful Meinardus, *JEthnol* 99 (1974) 273–274 and nn. 23–28, has mustered numerous examples from early modern Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Cyprus that might have dissuaded him from an ancient Athenian origin for the sliding ritual. D. G. Hogarth, *A Wandering Scholar in the Levant* (London 1896) 179–180, particularly notes, and compares with the ancient rites of Aphrodite, the cult of the Blessed Virgin at Paphos, Cyprus, in which both women and men, Christian and Muslim, seek fertility by rituals of incantation and passing through perforated rocks.

imagined as extending to the solid bedrock spur in which her church was embedded. The ancient Greeks had cults involving “sacred rocks,”⁵⁸ and theoretically they could have slid on rocks, even the rocks of the Hill of the Nymphs, as a fertility ritual, but without evidence this is a matter more of faith than reason.

As to the healing ritual, changing the garments of sick children also fits into a large pattern of religious rite that is so common that direct continuity from ancient prototypes, as suggested by Pittakis and others, is unneeded and unlikely. The ritual pattern is catharsis, in which the intention is to magically or miraculously remove pollution from the individual or the community by attaching it to an object or a person that can be then separated and, in some instances, destroyed. The crutches that were hung up in an ancient Asklepieion or the shrine at Lourdes were not only thankful signs for ailments taken away but also signs of ailments whose removal was still a matter of petition, hope, and faith. So it was intended in the healing ritual of Agia Marina that the sick child be “divested” of illness—a kind of pollution—with the removal and destruction of the dark garments and take on health with the donning of bright new clothing. This sort of ritual also is not unique to Agia Marina or even in Athens. Less than a kilometer to the northeast of her church is that of Agios Ioannis of the Column, where pious Greeks have traditionally sought cures from fever by attaching colored threads to the Corinthian column around which the church was built and asking the saint to bind their sickness to the column and release it from them.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See Kron, *AthMitt* 94 (1979) 67 n.92.

⁵⁹ R. Rodd, *The Customs and Lore of Modern Greece* (London 1892) 166–167. Savvas Samsonoglou (personal communication) tells me of the cult of Agia Kore in the woods of Mt. Olympus, where sick persons remove clothing and place it behind bushes, and then, after a time, retrieve the clothing and don it again, believing that the power of the saint can cause the illness to go with the clothing and be dispelled while that clothing is out of sight. Cf. the similar widespread use of such “rag trees” in healing rituals of Islamic cults (S. M. Zwemer, *The Influence of Animism on Islam* [London 1920] 210–219).

All told, the linking of Agia Marina with ancient cults and shrines fails the test of evidence. Without taking that test into consideration it is too easy to see continuity from antiquity where proximate shrines and similar attributes may have less remote explanations, or, in the long history of human needs and piety, may simply be coincidence. The very survival of many Athenian pagan shrines and cults, which is necessary for their supposed conversion to Christian use, is seriously called into question by the Herulian sack of Athens in 267, which left much of the city in ruins for more than a century, and later, in 580, the Avar invasion, which produced an utter lacuna of two decades in Athenian history.⁶⁰

On the other hand, but also working against the notion of continuity of cults, is the fact that where intellectual and religious paganism did survive in late antique Athens, Christianity was little welcomed and slow to take root. The Theodosian edicts, as noted above, had little success in Athens for a variety of reasons, perhaps the foremost being the long life of the pagan philosophical schools, especially those of Neo-Platonism. Even the earliest conversions of Athenian temples to churches toward the end of the sixth century were rare, and most cases were motivated by convenience rather than similarity of attributes or ritual.⁶¹ To cite the paramount example of such conversion, even the questions of when and to whom Christians rededicated the Parthenon allow of no precise or easy answers. Archaeological evidence of the building's conversion to a basilica plan is as early as the late sixth or early seventh century, but the earliest evidence that its patron was the Panagia comes in the tenth century.⁶² Perhaps the Panagia

⁶⁰ Frantz, *DOP* 19 (1965) 188–190, 197–199.

⁶¹ Frantz, *Agora* 71–72, 92; cf. Gregory, *AJP* 107 (1986) 48–57.

⁶² On the conversion and its evidence in architectural modifications, see F. W. Deichmann, “Die Basilika im Parthenon,” *AthMitt* 63–64 (1938–1939) 127–139; Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary* 445; Frantz, *Agora* 92; M. Korres, “The Parthenon from Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century,” in P. Tournikiotis (ed.), *The Parthenon and its Impact in Modern Times* (Athens 1994) 136–161, at 146–148. The pagan function of the Parthenon seems to have ceased in the

was the original Christian patron, and perhaps memory of Athena's sexual disposition inspired its dedication to a new Blessed Virgin. On the other hand, simply a general sense of hierarchy may have given the most prominent of Athenian temples to the holiest of Christian entities short of God.⁶³

In brief, at Athens especially there was no neat chronological cleavage between paganism and Christianity that would have facilitated the contact and syncretism of pagan and Christian religion, nor, when the two religions were tangent, were they as

fifth century, perhaps following the writ of Theodosius II against temples in 438 (Korres 141, 146), but the temple did not lose its last cult statue of Athena until later in the same century (Marinus *V.Procl.* 30; Frantz, *Agora* 58, 71). The Parthenon may have accommodated Christian rites not long after Justinian's edict of 529 against the teaching of philosophy and law, although the first evidence of such worship is a century later (Korres 146 and n.45); the delay may reflect that the edict was a general law rather than one directed specifically at Athens or the Parthenon (*Cod.Iust.* 1.11.10.2 and 1.5.18.4; Joh. Malalas 18.47; cf. Frantz, *Agora* 84).

⁶³ A hazard of the zeal to connect Christian patrons to similar ancient deities is well exemplified in the confusion of a competing or conjoined tradition that the Parthenon was at some time dedicated to Agia Sophia, the Wisdom of God, either as a successor to Athena's wisdom or to commemorate the ancient philosophical history of Athens; see Judeich, *Topographie* 106 and n.3. An inscribed notice of the renovation of the temple to Agia Sophia which Pittakis (*Athènes* 387) claimed to have seen in 1831 on the south wall of the Parthenon and which was supposedly destroyed in the War of Independence is suspect for more reasons than Pittakis' well-known fallibility: the inscription was not mentioned by the observant Jesuit J. P. Babins in his letter of 8 October 1672 to the Abbé Pécoil giving a detailed account of the Parthenon and its dedication to *Sagesse éternelle* (printed in A. Michaelis, *Der Parthenon* [Leipzig 1871] 336–337 no. 9), and the text of the inscription must be tortured to make chronological sense (e.g., by J. Strzygowski, "Die Akropolis in altbyzantinischer Zeit," *AthMitt* 14 [1889] 274–276). Among nineteenth-century scholars Michaelis (45–46 and n.166) was precocious in dismissing the report of the inscription as unreliable. At least as tenuous and making no sense as a reference to the Christian Parthenon is a possible form of the word σοφία scratched on the Parthenon's west side, sixth column from the north, third drum (see A. K. Orlandos, *Τὰ χαράγματα τοῦ Παρθενῶνος* [Athens 1973] no. 53 and p.31 of his introduction).

accommodating of each other as many of the writers cited here would have them be. But the point of this essay's skepticism is more particular than general. It does not extend to denying that there are well-evidenced cases of Christian churches founded at or near the shrines of pagan deities with analogous attributes or even cases of Christian hagiographies and rituals shaped to serve the same needs that were served by pagan deities. It does not even deny this possibility in the case of Agia Marina of Theseion. What it denies in her case is that there is any evidence of contact or borrowing from ancient cult and ritual that would warrant even plausible speculation of continuity or commemoration.⁶⁴

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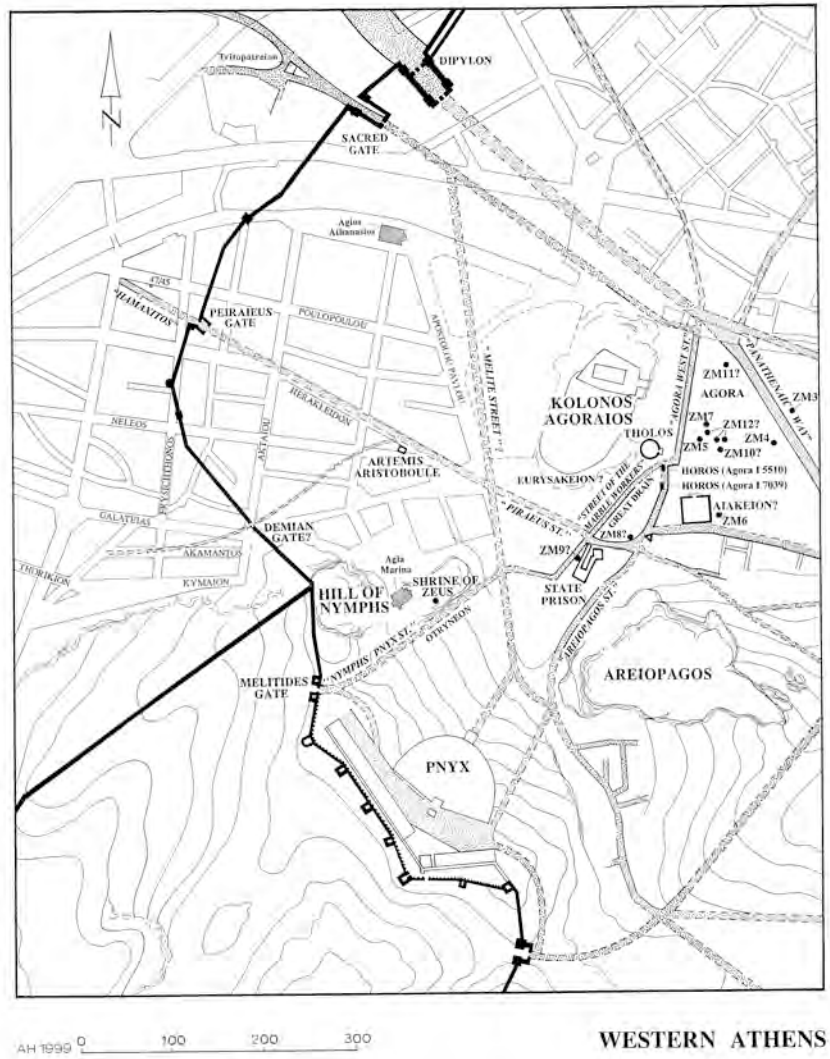


Figure 1: Western Athens
Anne Hooton, American School of Classical Studies, Agora Excavations

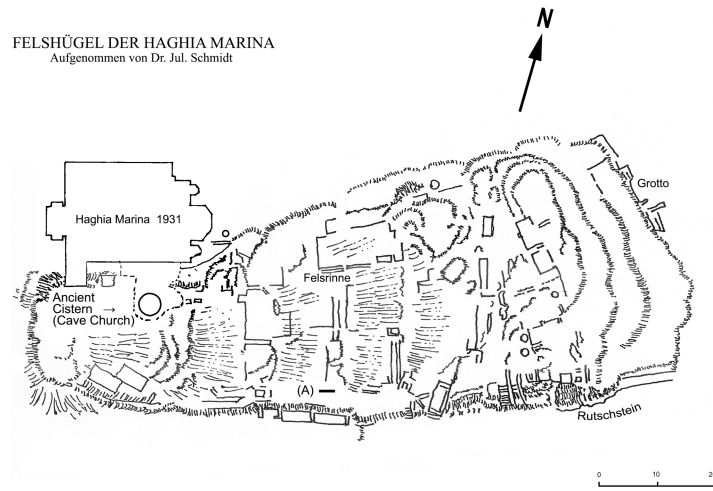


Figure 2: Northeast spur of Hill of the Nymphs
Adapted from Julius Schmidt (in Curtius, *Karten*, pl. 7)



Figure 3: Athens in 1931 from summit of Hill of the Nymphs,
Northeast spur and Church of Agia Marina in foreground
Photo, American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations

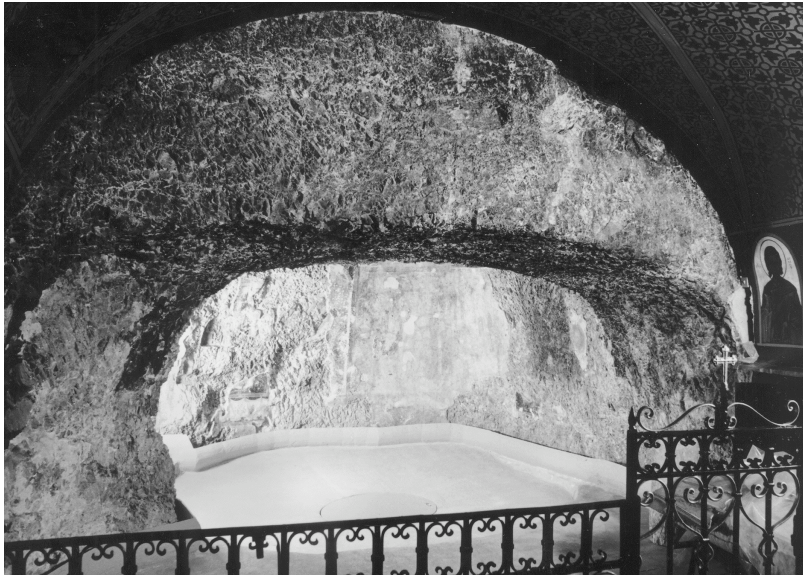
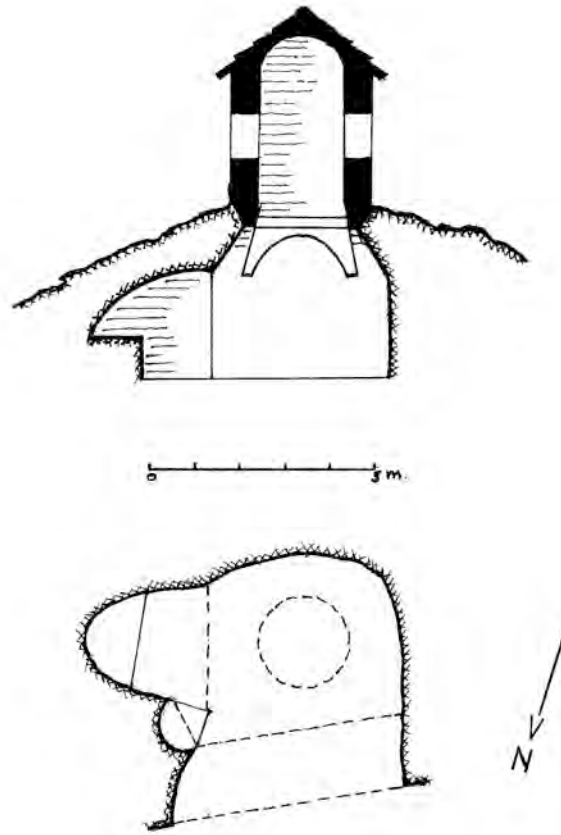


Figure 4: Cave church as baptistery in modern structure of Agia Marina
Photo, courtesy of E. Tasoulas



Figure 5: Foreground: Church of Agia Marina Theseiou, 1868 or 1875
Photo, F. Bonfils; courtesy E. Antonatos



*Figure 6: Ancient cave-cistern and rock-cut well crowned by *troullos* of church of Agia Marina Theseiou*
 Plan and section: after *Εύρετήριον τῶν Μνημείων τῆς Ἑλλάδος*, fig. 132

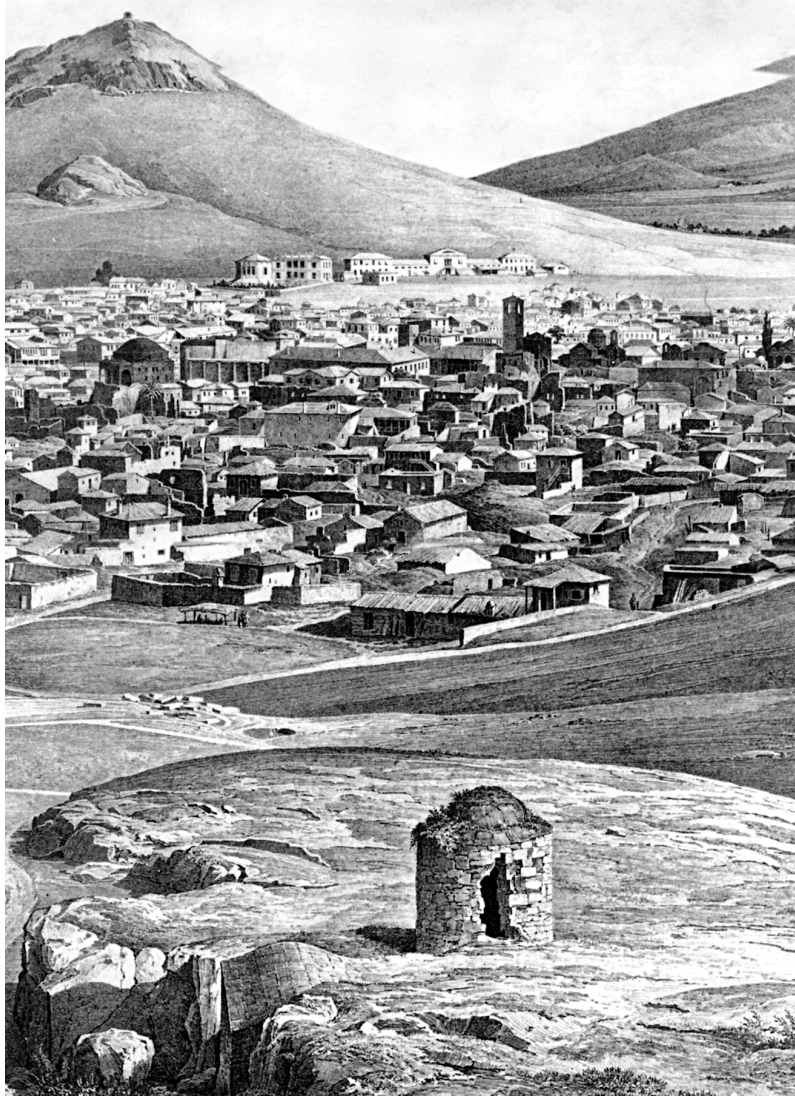


Figure 7: View of Athens from the Hill of the Nymphs, ca. 1835,
troullos and cave-church of Agia Marina in foreground
Stademann, *Panorama* 26-27 pl. 10



Figure 8: Narthex and Cave-church of Agia Marina, 1842
Moncel, *Ἀθήναι*, pl. XV no. 25