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Manliness and the Cross – A Note on the Reception of Aspects of Early Christian Masculinity in Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*

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Zusammenfassung:

In seinem Beitrag 'Construction of Masculinity in Antiquity and Early Christianity,' *lectio difficilior* 2006:2 (http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/06_2/marin_construction.htm), weist Mayordomo Marin zu Recht auf die problematische Beziehung zwischen antiker idealer Männlichkeit und christlicher Identität hin. Christliche Identität ist in dieser Hinsicht deshalb problematisch, weil sie von einem gekreuzigten Erlöser ausgeht. Die Miszelle zeigt auf, wie das Kreuz in der *Vita Antonii* von Athanasius von Alexandrien noch immer im Rahmen einer Diskussion über Männlichkeit (*andreia*) eine Rolle spielt, jetzt aber als Merkmal idealer Männlichkeit gilt, die nach dem Muster hellenistischer Ideale beschrieben wird.

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1. Introduction

Ideals related to masculinity have developed over the centuries. Early and earliest Christian texts show how Christ believers, such as Paul and John, found themselves in the position that they had to renegotiate the ideal of masculinity in the light of a supremely unmanly crucified savior. This note demonstrates how the controversial concept of a crucified Messiah could be reinterpreted in terms of precisely these ideals in the fourth century *Life of Anthony* by Athanasius of Alexandria. The part of the *Life of Anthony* focused on here is striking because it reinterprets precisely the most problematic aspect of early Christian masculinity, namely the cross, in such a way that it becomes the epitome of ideal masculinity. Thus, this note constitutes a short study in the history of reception of New Testament ideals of masculinity. In line with the nature of this contribution, however, it cannot be as exhaustive as the subject would deserve.

In order to achieve this, first examples of the way in which New Testament authors deal with the question of masculinity are presented, after this a passage from the *Life of Anthony* and the way in which masculinity appears in it is analyzed. Based on these two steps general conclusions will form the final part of this note.

2. Aspects of New Testament Masculinities

In a contribution that takes into account the broader discussion of New Testament masculinities as well, Mayordomo Marin pointed out recently that Paul's writings witness to an ambiguous stance towards the ideals of masculinity, as they were current in the Hellenistic world.¹ Mayordomo Marin demonstrates how Paul renegotiates masculinity, while retaining some of its ideals. The following three of his conclusions constitute a good starting point for the line of thought followed in this note:

'2. As a man Paul does not question the active role of the male agent. But he makes, at least, two qualifications: A Christian male belongs as bodily person to Christ and he is morally bound to express his love towards his fellow-believers by renouncing important aspects of his male autonomy.

5. As a follower of Christ Paul clings to a system of values (or virtues) which has much in common with the Roman value system, but not all: being humble (*tapeinos*), for instance, is something which runs contrary to hegemonic forms of masculinity. On the other hand we do not find »courage« (*andreia*) as a virtue exposed by Paul.

6. As an unmarried Jewish man Paul limits sexuality to marriage. But even marriage is a lesser evil, because sexuality always implies a retraction from the complete rule of Christ. The most excellent form of male control is, thus, self-control.'

Thus, Paul accepts generally held ideals of masculinity, such as the ideal of absolute self-control, but also modifies them, for example by attributing all his strength to a source outside of himself, Christ, who himself embodies very unmanly virtues, such as humility. In this context, one can also argue that the concept of the cross and the self-identification with someone as unmanly as a crucified Messiah, while upholding the significance of true manliness, is part of the background of Paul's need to renegotiate the ideals of masculinity. Something similar can be argued for John as well: the combination of Christ as an ideal male with Christ as the one who reveals his glory at his crucifixion leads to a reinterpretation of what it means to be an ideal man. I outlined this more fully elsewhere.² These few comments show how more generally held ideals of masculinity and emerging Christian theologizing could interact. Especially the cross and dependence on an outward source of identity, namely Christ, seem to have been important incentives for rethinking ideal masculinity. This is worth retaining, as at this

stage cross and masculinity appear as at odds with each other; this will be returned to in the context of the *Life of Anthony*. Before doing so, however, one more insight of Mayordomo Marin should be turned to.

Preparing his conclusion six, as quoted above, Mayordomo Marin also makes the following point about masculinity and asceticism, as related to Paul's life of celibacy, arguing that:

‘Christian masculinity culminates in complete control over one’s bodily needs for him. This anthropological choice paves the way for the latter Christian movement of celibate life. From this perspective, early ascetics and monks were not defective males but, quite to the contrary, hyper-masculine figures, able to control even the most forceful passions.’³

With this theoretical background, one can now turn to an example of emerging Christian monasticism in which masculinity and the cross are related to each other directly.

3. The Cross, Control and Masculinity in the *Life of Anthony*

Athanasius of Alexandria's *Life of Anthony* is at once one of the earliest more extensive accounts of early Christian monasticism, as well as a document that seeks to promote this kind of life.⁴ One of the themes addressed in this document is, as one might expect, the conflict between the ideals of monasticism and the, presumably generally accepted, ideals of (Hellenistic) society at large. This confrontation appears for example in a number of exchanges between the monk Anthony and philosophers.⁵ One of these exchanges runs as follows and provides a striking window into how the cross and masculinity had become related to each other in a strikingly new way:

‘74. After this again certain others came; and these were men who were deemed wise among the Greeks, and they asked him a reason for our faith in Christ. But when they attempted to dispute concerning the preaching of the divine Cross and meant to mock, Anthony stopped for a little, and first pitying their ignorance, said, through an interpreter, who could skillfully interpret his words, ‘Which is more beautiful, to confess the Cross or to attribute to those whom you call gods adultery and the seduction of boys? For that which is chosen by us is a sign of courage (= *andreia*) and a sure token of the contempt of death, while yours are the passions of licentiousness.’⁶

This text gives rise to a number of observations. First, the cross, at once a symbol of unmanliness and a central symbol in early Christian theology as exemplified by Paul and others, is here taken as a symbol of courage, *andreia*, a virtue not mentioned by Paul, but very closely related to ideals of masculinity – not only etymologically. Second, the Christian ideal is pitted against the ‘Greek’ ideal in such a way that the cross becomes a symbol of (self-)control or control over the passions, whereas the Greek gods are seen to be examples of loss of control. This double dynamic leads to an interpretation of the cross as a symbol of masculinity understood as a complete control of the passions. The way in which this is achieved is by interpreting allegiance to the cross as a sign of courage in that one is even able to face and overcome any fear of death. Thus, one more passion is overcome and the Christian appears more masculine than any of his (/her) Greek counterparts. This is well in line with what Mayordomo Marin already pointed, namely that the early Christian ascetics were in fact supermasculine figures, not unmasculine ones. However, they still had to prove this claim and negotiate this with their theological heritage.

What does this mean for the way in which the cross has been reinterpreted on the background of the ancient discourse on masculinity? Whereas it seems that Paul – through his allegiance to a crucified Messiah – or John, by presenting Jesus as the ideal-typical human being / male, reinterpreted masculinity in the light of the cross, Athanasius takes a different route. In fact, Athanasius approaches the cross so strongly from what it means in the terms of overcoming death and by consequence also of the fear of it, that the scandalous nature of the cross, which is so difficult to reconcile with ideal ancient masculinity, is trumped and the crucified *Christus Victor* and those who follow him become the ideal males.

4. Further References to Manliness in the *Life of Anthony*

The observations in the previous paragraph would only constitute a curiosity if one would not be able to show that an interest in *andreia* belonged to Athanasius’ programmatic in his biography of Anthony. However, it seems that it is well possible to show that there is a programmatic interest in *andreia* in the *Life of Anthony*, as the following brief overview may show. For reasons of time and space only the noun *andreia* can be focused upon here; in spite of this, the following texts still give a good idea of the line of thought expressed by Anthony in Athanasius’ biography of him.

The first text that deserves attention is a programmatic statement on possessions in *Vit.* 17:7. Here, Anthony says the following:

‘For what does it avail us to possess what we cannot take with us? Why not rather possess those things which we can take along with us – prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude (*andreia*), understanding, charity, love of the poor, faith in Christ, meekness, hospitality? Once we possess these, we shall find them going before us, preparing a welcome for us in the land of the meek.’

This text can be characterized as a catalogue of virtues. In fact, the list seems to be some kind of precursor to the later list of seven cardinal virtues – hope is excluded, charity is extended to include love for the poor – (cf. also *Vit.* 30:2). The first four of this list constitute a list of principal virtues recognized outside of Christianity as well, the latter derive in all likelihood from Pauline tradition, even if they appear incomplete here (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13).⁷ Thus, this list constitutes an attempt to negotiate more generally recognized virtues with more specifically Christian ones. In this respect, this catalogue constitutes an analogy to the text discussed in the previous paragraph, and certainly has programmatic character.

The impression conveyed in the previous lines is confirmed by the next occurrence of *andreia* in Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony*:

‘When, therefore, you have a vision and are afraid, if then the fear is taken from you immediately and in its place comes ineffable joy and contentment; and courage (*andreia*) and recovery of strength and calmness of thought and the other things I have mentioned, and stoutheartedness, too, and love of God, then be of good cheer and pray – for your joy and your soul’s tranquility betoken the holiness of Him who is present.’ (*Vit.* 36:3-4)

This text is admittedly less systematic in character than the one quoted previously, but as paradigmatic description of the presence of good spirits, it has nevertheless programmatic character. In this respect, it confirms the witness of what has been discussed above.

Also a final occurrence of *andreia* in Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony*, in *Vit.* 27:1, is well in line with what has been presented already:

‘The Lord therefore, because He is God, silences the demons. As for us, we have learned our lessons from the Saints and do as they have done and imitate their courage (*andreia*).’

Certainly, the three texts discussed in this paragraph do not show that Athanasius / Anthony has tipped the scales of the ideal of masculinity entirely. The texts do show, however, that *andreia* was a concept used more frequently by Anthony / Athanasius, even in programmatic statements. Furthermore, these programmatic statements seem to aim at negotiating between more generally accepted virtues and more specifically Christian ones. Again, because of the character of this contribution, the way in which these various virtues are construed by Athanasius / Anthony, especially with regard to their relationship to ideal masculinity, cannot be pursued here. This was only done for the virtue of *andreia* as constructed in relationship to the cross in the previous paragraph. One can well imagine, however, that further study of these lead to similar findings. In spite of this, this paragraph has done what it set out to do: to show the interest of Athanasius / Anthony in masculinity in general in as far as this can be seen based on his use of the noun *andreia*. This paves the way for some more general conclusions.

5. Conclusion

This brief note has illustrated how in the course of approx. 250 years, the problematic character of the cross for the construction of an ideal masculinity that remains both faithful to the Christian symbol system, including a crucified Messiah, and to more generally held ideals of masculinity, is overcome. This takes place by interpreting the cross emphatically in terms of a symbol of Christ’s victory over death, rather than as an instrument of emasculating the male Christ and his followers. In the thought of Athanasius, Christ and the Christians – especially in the shape of his protagonist and paradigm Anthony of Egypt – are supermasculine figures, ready to face all kinds of passions, even fear of death, empowered by Christ’s victory over all evil, including passions. In this way, Athanasius remains faithful to Paul, John and other early Christian writings in that he retains an emphasis on the cross and – in fidelity to the broader culture – in that he interprets masculinity in terms of being in control of one’s passions. He differs from John, Paul, and others, however, in that he views the cross primarily as a symbol of victory and not so much as an instrument and symbol of suffering that gives rise to a reinterpretation of true masculinity. This approach, however, also allows him to present a more integrated account of what it means to be

masculine than Paul. Thus, it has been shown that the interaction between the ideals of Greco-Roman masculinity and Christian identity and theology, which needs to be able to address the allegation that their Christ is somehow a deficient male, reaches slightly different conclusions in the thought of a fourth century Alexandrian than it did in that thought of a first century missionary. The role the cross plays in this context is exemplary. Further study could trace the trajectory between the relationship between Christian identity and ideal masculinity between the time of the New Testament writings and the rise of early Christian monasticism, this, however, goes beyond the scope of this note.

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¹ See: Moisés Mayordomo Marin, ‘Construction of Masculinity in Antiquity and Early Christianity,’ *Lectio Difficilior* 2006:2, *passim*. The analysis of Hellenistic masculinity that Mayordomo Marin presents is presupposed here. See for an overview also: Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch. Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 19-102.

² Peter-Ben Smit, ‘Jesus and the Ladies. Constructing and Deconstructing Johannine Macho-Christology,’ *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2:3 (2006).

³ Cf. Mayordomo Marin, ‘Construction.’ See for the same also: Kuefler, *Eunuch*, 170-178.

⁴ For a general literary introduction to this work, cf. e.g. G.J.M. Bartelink, *Athanase d’Alexandrie, Vie d’Antoine Sources Chrétiennes* 400 (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 27-76, see also: idem, ‘Die literarische Gattung der Vita Antonii. Struktur und Motive,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982), 38-62.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Athanasius, *Vita*, 72-80. On the relationship between spirituality / Christian knowledge and philosophy in the *Life of Anthony*, cf. e.g. David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 253-265.

⁶ Translation (also in all other instances) taken from: Robert T. Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The Life of Saint Anthony* Ancient Christian Writers 10 (Westminster: Newman, 1978). For the Greek text, cf. Bartelink, *Vie*.

⁷ Cf. briefly: Bartelink, *Vie*, 183n3.

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