

To Nurture or Neglect: The Body in Early Christian Art and Cappadocian Thought**Laurie J. Christianson**

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Christians of the fourth century faced a true dilemma when contemplating the beauty of the human form. Did the body deserve care and honor as a noble creation of God, or was it a fleshy and corrupt hindrance to spiritual growth? Centuries of exegesis had left the matter largely unresolved by the time the Cappadocian Fathers began setting forth their views on the subject. Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, were among the most influential theologians of their day. What they felt to be the proper role of physical beauty in Christian dogma reveals, not surprisingly, a blending of the Classical *philokalia* and austere Biblical sensibility. Yes, the body should be nurtured to give recognition to God, the Master Craftsman; and yes, the body must be neglected in order to suppress its dangerous urges. Surprising though it may seem, these contrasting opinions were held simultaneously, without apparent thought of contradiction.

Such duality was commonplace in the realm of Christian aesthetics. It involved issues such as the inherent perfection of man and the physical appearance of Christ. When the artist wished to depict inspirational Christian heroes, two drastically different figure types emerged under the term "athlete" and became synonymous representations of the ideal man. This paper will briefly explore these body types as they are expressed in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers and illustrated in the art of the third to the seventh centuries.

IDEAL BEAUTY: CHRIST AND ADAM

Attractiveness of body was a notion that found little support among the Cappadocians, although they clearly appreciated the human form.¹ Clement of Alexandria, one of the most liberal of second-century theologians, had suggested "that beauty is a noble flower growing from good health; health is within the body, and the beauty grows outwardly, manifesting itself in good color. The most beauti-

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ful and healthy ways of life, by exercising the body, create true and lasting beauty."² Basil, a true ascetic, hesitantly admitted that "some have rightly defined health as the good order of natural functions."³ This image of good looks and health served as an ideal to those who believed, along with St. Paul, that the body was the temple of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Man was the culmination of God's handiwork according to Gregory of Nyssa, because of the supremely important position he was to occupy. Gregory writes, "...but it was not until after the preparation of the realm that the king was revealed"⁵ Even the process of creation was different for man. Gregory states: "A sun is made, and no deliberation precedes. For heaven it is the same ... a single word was all that was needed for their creation ... only for the making of man does the Author of the Universe advance with circumspection: He first prepares material for the formation, and forms [man] to an Archetypal beauty."⁶ The Archetypal beauty referred to is God. Although God has no visible form, He manifested Himself through the person of Christ.

Early depictions of Christ show Him as a bearded, or unbearded, man of pleasant features, but the theological texts hardly agreed on His appearance. The controversy surrounding the physical nature of Christ made it crucial for Orthodox Christians to insist that "...the God-bearing flesh was formed out of the common lump of human nature."⁷ This, coupled with the desire for artistic representations, led naturally to the question of His external beauty.

For the majority of Christians reared midst the artistic heritage of the Classical world, it was inconceivable that the fleshy garment of the Lord could be anything less than perfect in all respects. His outward beauty must have mirrored His spiritual perfection. Origen, the brilliant third century interpreter of scripture, saw danger in placing too much emphasis on aesthetics, and declared that Christ had been physically unattractive, thereby forcing believers to seek beauty beneath the surface.⁸ But by far the most interesting notion of Christ's physiognomy comes from a Gnostic source which was well circulated in the late second century. The reputed author, John, son of Zebedee, one of the four original disciples, describes Christ's use of multiple forms and His ability to change His body at will, depending upon the circumstances and the viewer.⁹ This was not far out of line with the post-resurrection accounts in the gospels of Mark and Luke, where Christ appeared to them in "another form" on the road to Emmaus.¹⁰ No matter what opinion a Christian held of Christ's outward appearance, it was unanimously accepted that His inner nature was of supreme importance.

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But to say that outward appearance did not matter is to overlook an important aspect of God's creation. As Gregory of Nazianzus writes, "God created man to be both visible and invisible ... The body is of matter, but the soul is the breath and image of God."¹¹ To be created in the image of God suggested to theologians and artists alike a physical beauty which is often found in representations of the First Man.

A detail of Adam from the fourth century sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (Fig. 1), shows an accurately rendered, finely developed body. But the psychological element of shame overshadows the robust beauty. Adam turns away from Eve and the Tempter and covers himself in embarrassment, casting his eyes downward toward the earth. How different this effect is from that of the late fourth century "Carrand diptych" (Fig. 2), an ivory which shows Adam before the transgression. This carving exemplified God's original concept of man, unself-conscious and perfect in form, not only master over the beasts of Eden, but also over his own flesh. In contrast, the other half of the diptych shows man after the Fall, surrounded by concealing drapery and cloaked with mortality.

Through Original Sin, the body had lost the dignity of its formation. According to the Fathers, it regained much of its previous status through the Incarnation of Christ. Gregory of Nazianzus writes, "...for He honors the body...by being seen in a bodily form."¹² There was no reason to be ashamed of the flesh because Christ Himself had experienced the human condition.

What must be avoided, however, is the sin of vanity. Gregory of Nyssa writes, "...the Creator of the Universe ... bestowed upon man wisdom and godlike attributes, adorning him with great beauty."¹³ Lest this result in vanity, Basil was quick to remind Christians: "Today he [man] is vigorous in body, grown fleshy from delicacies, with a flowerlike complexion in the prime of life, fresh and eager, irresistible in attack; tomorrow that same one is piteous or wasted with age, or weakened by disease."¹⁴ Although it was important to guard against conceit and to be aware of the frailty of life, there was another way in which the Christian could applaud the physical beauty of man: this through the heroic image of the athlete.

THE BODY NURTURED

Prior to the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christian worship, believers suffered periodic imprisonment and death. Although such persecution was relatively infrequent, the effect it had upon the young religion was immense.¹⁵

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On the face of it, the martyr seems an unlikely choice for a hero--especially the Christian who accepted death so passively, even going so far as to Volunteer his life in public spectacles.¹⁶ But deeper consideration reveals that martyrdom had its own rewards. Dying for one's faith was the only means of gaining immediate entrance to heaven, without waiting for the blaring trumpets of the Last Judgment.¹⁷ It was also considered painless by many theologians, who wrote of the 'analgesic state' experienced by martyrs under torture.¹⁸ Moreover, martyrdom was a guarantee of fame, remembrance, and adoration within the Christian community.¹⁹

Crucial to an understanding of the role of the martyr is that he fell in the same arena occupied by the athlete, a public hero. It was this image of martyrdom, liberally supported by New Testament metaphors, which contributed to

the popularity of the athlete for Christ.²⁰ Unlike the pristine figure of Adam, these warriors for God manifest their spiritual strength through the prowess of their bodies.²¹ The struggle against evil is depicted as a real battle, with the true believer primed for conquest. This heroic image is not unlike examples found in the secular art of the period, with many similarities to the athlete-hero, Hercules.²² As was true of many heroes in Greek mythology, the display of physical might was tapped from deeper wells of inner strength, making it an ideal image to be assimilated by Christian artists.

The metaphor of the martyr as athlete appears early in Apocryphal literature, such as the Second and Fourth Book of Maccabees, and continues on throughout apostolic and patristic writing.²³ St. Paul had used this term when referring to those who presented their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Gregory of Nazianzus was well aware of this usage and refers to Paul as "that bravest of athletes."²⁴ Gregory then employed the metaphor of the athletic contest to show how spiritual battles must be fought on earth. He tells us that a wrestler must get underneath his opponent in order to usurp him. Likewise, the Christian must humble himself in order to conquer.²⁵ Basil also used the analogy of an athletic event and asked Christians to contemplate the action because "He who watches athletes ought to participate to some extent himself in the contest."²⁶

To show a well-developed physique was a logical way for a craftsman to translate the literary analogy of an athlete into stone, whether it was intended to denote physical or spiritual strength. Jonah is depicted emerging from the sea monster's jaws in an unusual third century sculpture in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig.3). The renewed faith of this reluctant prophet is shown by the superior condi-

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tion we find him in after his harrowing experience. His face is placid, almost introspective, and he radiates health and well-being, now that his priorities have been set to rights.²⁷

THE BODY NEGLECTED

So ingrained was the notion of sacrifice in the Christian faith that when the persecutions ended believers did not stop dying--at least symbolically. The ascetic movement, motivated by a desire to renounce the pleasures of life, grew in popularity during the fourth century.²⁸ Aside from death, it remained the one way in which the devoted follower could demonstrate his spiritual commitment. In its highest form, asceticism was self-martyrdom; the believer became "dead" to the world around him. This negation of materialism was certainly not a new idea in the East; some eight centuries earlier a martyred Socrates had described philosophy as the "practice of dying."²⁹ And there had been a long-standing pun in the Classical world, found in Plato, Seneca, and others, on the words *soma* and *sema*, equating the body with the tomb.³⁰

Borrowing from philosophy whenever appropriate, Christians found that the concept of the body as death and the soul as life meshed perfectly with their dogma. As Paul had lamented in his letter to the Romans, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"³¹ Later exegetes found this a most appealing idea. Gregory of Nyssa takes up this image when admonishing the Devil to quit tempting the newly baptized: "Flee therefore from us, ill-omened one! for it is a corpse thou seekest to despoil ... one who has long since lost his senses for pleasure."³² In his oration on his brother Caesarius, Gregory of Nazianzus had referred to bodies as "the tombs we bear about with us,"³³ and later bows in the direction of pagan learning, stating: "... by despising the body and everything that is of it, all that is impermanent, turbulent or destructible, one may become totally concerned with higher values ... making this life, in Plato's phrase, a rehearsal for death . . ."³⁴

Many of the popular stories of the age refashioned the nearly inhuman sacrifices of ascetics for entertainment and instruction. *The Life of Antony*, written by the powerful fourth century churchman, Athanasius, exhorts Christians to devote all of their time to the soul instead of the body.³⁵ Finding the intellectual and social climate agreeable, three such monastically inclined men as the Cappadocians seized the opportunity to lend their support to these ascetic values. Gregory of Nazianzus thus portrays the ideal Christian as one who condemns the visible and considers only "how he may become internally perfect."³⁶

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Early Byzantine portraiture illustrates this marked inclination toward the spiritual.³⁷ The linear quality of hair and features are stopped short by wide, expressive eyes, easily the most prominent aspect of the face. Scholar H.P. L'Orange has traced this development from earlier sources, and notes the difference, "inner concentration has ... developed into ascetic isolation. The lean, oblong face ... expresses a sort of exasperated world renunciation, an embittered withdrawal to the interior, a frenetic no to the exterior world."³⁸

The upturned glance, used so effectively by Constantine, was a sign to Christians of the subject's devotion. Gregory of Nyssa writes, "The stature of a man is upright, extending toward heaven, and looking upward. This posture conveys authority and denotes his royal power."³⁹ In his account of creation, Basil also mentions that man was made to stand erect, with his eyes cast upward, in contrast to the beasts, which always look upon the earth.⁴⁰ Looking heavenward was also a way for ascetics to overcome the enormous attraction of the physical world. Gregory of Nazianzus admits the difficulty of this and claims that even through the constant effort of looking upwards, it is hard to defeat the power of matter.⁴¹

A portrait of a man from Ephesus (Fig.4) created in the mid-fifth century provides great insight into how the beauty of an ascetic was measured. Through the shallow modeling of the portrait, with its linear quality, the immediate impression is one of spirituality. The facial details, such as they are, have been highly simplified and lack traditional standards of proportion. This image comes close to being a Christian "sign" of holiness, as it embodies a character rather than a real individual. The eyes, rather than looking upward, radiate spirituality outward as they stare into the realm of the soul.

Those who had the willpower to deny their physical needs were viewed as role models. Gregory of Nazianzus tells us that ascetics "remained as teachers of virtue for others—living martyrs, breathing monuments, mute proclamations" of the life of the spirit.⁴² Gregory also mentions that holy men inflict hardships upon themselves not only for purification, but also for the instruction of those weaker in character.⁴³ It was not expected that the average believer could, or should, totally emulate this meager way of life. Ascetics served as mortal examples of the power of God over flesh, which could then be applied to certain aspects of everyday life.

Gluttony, for example, widely held to be the first sin of Adam and Eve, was a prime target of self-righteous ascetics who had long since

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triumphed over gastronomical pleasures.⁴⁴ In his book, *The Body in Society*, Peter Brown explores the curious Early Christian belief that man in his natural state, i.e., before Original Sin, functioned on very little food.⁴⁵ Satisfied by a few morsels, the body was thought to produce enough heat and energy to animate itself indefinitely. Desire for, and the necessity of, larger quantities of food was part of man's punishment for his sensual iniquity. It was the business of the holy man to remake his gluttonous body and force it to operate on as little sustenance as possible.

The emaciated form is the artistic equivalent of the denial of sensual pleasures found in many theological writings, including the Cappadocians. The early sixth-century "Murano" ivory (Fig. 5) from the Museo Nazionale, Ravenna, is just one of the many examples of the elongated form in early Christian art.⁴⁶ Aside from the lankiness of the figures, the viewer notices nothing so much as the deeply drilled eyes. The dark, animated windows serve as directives of the action, reducing the bodies to mere appendages housing the soul. These are holy men over whom the world no longer holds sway. Thin and ill-proportioned, they fulfill the advice of Basil offered to Christians to "avail themselves of the bodily fast for the joy of the soul."⁴⁷ Gregory of Nyssa also advocated the subjugation of the body. He writes: "... strength and health he [the Christian] will not try to gain by bodily training and feeding, but by all that is contrary to this, by perfecting the spirit's strength in the body's weakness."⁴⁸ As it was genuinely believed that the ideal body would require little nourishment, these slender, eloquent figures portray a Christian hero who approached the heavenly realm while still on earth.

Physical perfection, then, was considered a gift which God bestowed upon the First Man and all of the natural world. By appreciating the beauty around them, believers were giving thanks and reflecting on the Master Artist of creation. Yet the danger of vanity and sensual delight was ever present, so the Christian was always mindful of both conditions and accepted this duality as not only prudent but consistent.

The word "athlete" came to represent two very different interpretations of Christian beauty. It was applied to the true martyrs of the early centuries as a tribute to their bravery in the face of death. In art, the physical prowess of the Classical hero was often used to illustrate the inner strength of these sacrificial victims.

At the same time, the term "athlete" has been used by religious figures from Philo to Mother Teresa of Calcutta to denote the ascetic

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who engages in a daily battle against the flesh. The abhorrence of gluttony as a sin that manifested itself externally is concurrent with the unnatural elongated style of many heroic figures in early Christian art. Whereas these bodies could not be judged as conventionally pleasing, they represent a deeper spiritual beauty through the negation of the flesh.

We see through the art of the period and the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers that either the vigorous, healthy body, or the spare, ravaged frame could personify the highest Christian ideals. Therefore, regarding the question-- Should the body be nurtured or neglected?--the Early Christian answer in both cases would be, yes.

Notes

ABBREVIATIONS OF FREQUENTLY USED SOURCES

ANF	The Ante Nicene Fathers
CWS	The Classics of Western Spirituality
FC	The Fathers of the Church
NPNF	The Nicene-Post Nicene Fathers
PG	J. Migne, Patrologia Graeca
SC	Sources Chrétiennes

1. For descriptive passages of physical beauty see, Basil, *In Hexaemeron*, FC 5.2; Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate*, FC 3; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, NPNF 8.10.
2. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, ANF 3.11.
3. Basil, *Hex* FC 9.3.
4. I Cor. 3:16-17.
5. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Opificio Hominis*, SC 2.1.
6. Ibid. 3.2.
7. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto*, NPNF 5.12; also see Rom. 9:21.

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8. A discussion of some early Christian sources for later Medieval views of the beauty of Christ can be found in Umberto Eco. *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 122-125.
9. "The Apocryphon of John," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson, rev. ed. (Leiden, 1988), 105-7. Also see Elaine Pagel's discussion of this text in *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York, 1979), 73.
10. Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-32.
11. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, PG 36.321.
12. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, NPNF 39.16
13. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio*, PG 46.662.
14. Basil, *Hex*, FC 5.2
15. Origin tells us that those Christians who were actually put to death, "could be easily numbered." *Contra Celsus*, ANF 3.8. Eusebius also mentions the fact that there were no universal persecutions until the third century, *Church History*, III.3.
16. Tertullian, *Ad Scapula*, ANF 5. See also Hilary A. Armstrong, *Expectations of Immortality in Late Antiquity*, (Milwaukee, 1987), 44.
17. Tertullian, *De Anima*, ANF 55.4-5. St. Cyprian also held this belief, *Ad Fortunatum*, ANF 13.
18. Gregory of Nyssa describes the painless state of martyrs in *Vita Macrina*, PG 46.977. A lengthy discussion is also found in Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (New York, 1989), 438-41.
19. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, ANF 4.9; 4.26.
20. 1 Cor. 9:25-7; Phil. 3:14; Heb. 12:1; 1 Tim. 1:18, 6.12; 2 Tim. 4:6-8. See also the discussion in Robert J. Daly, *Christians Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background Before Origen*, (Washington, D.C., 1978), 383-5.
21. For examples of the athletic Christian physique, see Wolfgang Fritz volbach, *Early Christian Art* (New York, 1973), pls. 114; 250.

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22. Similarities between the secular art can be seen in two images of Hercules in volbach, pls. 180; 251.
23. 4 Mac. 17:11, 17:15.
24. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, NPNF 2:84.
25. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, NPNF 32:16.
26. Basil, *Hex*, FC 6.1.
27. Two other representations of Jonah, the ever-valiant athlete, appear in volbach, pls. 5; 87.
28. This rise in popularity was not without its critics, particularly among aristocrats who feared losing sons and daughters--potential heirs--to this movement. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York. 1988), 259-284.

29. Plato, *Phaedo* 65.
30. Plato, *Cratylus* 400 b,c; Seneca, *Epistle* 102.26.
32. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ*, NPNF 524.
34. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle*, FC 31.
35. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, CWS 45.
36. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, FC 21.23.
37. See volbach, pl. 66, for an example of Early Byzantine portraiture. Several of these portraits are discussed in Jale Inan and Elisabeth Rosenbaum, *Roman and Early Byzantine Portrait Sculpture in Asia Minor*, (London, 1966).
38. H.P. L~Drange, "The Antique Origin of Medieval Portraiture," *Likeness and Icon: Selected Studies in Classical and Early Medieval Art*, (Denmark, 1973), 99.

39. Gregory of Nyssa, *Hominis*, SC 8.1.
40. Basil, *Hex*, FC 9.2.
41. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, PG 35.493.
42. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, FC 43.5
43. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, FC 21.28.
44. Basil, *On the Renunciation of the World*, FC. 25.
45. Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, 223.
46. Some other examples of ascetic figures are represented in volbach, pls. 53, 143; 217.
47. Basil, *Hex*, FC 8.8.
48. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virg*, NPNF 20.