Did Pseudo-Dionysius Live in Constantinople?

Paul L. Gavrilyuk
University of St. Thomas,
2115 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105-1096, USA
plgavrilyuk@stthomas.edu

Abstract
This article aims to reopen and advance the discussion of the geographic location of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the author of the Corpus Dionysiacum. While various locales, for example, Antioch and Alexandria, have been proposed, none of the hypotheses about Dionysius’s identity and location has to date gained the universal acceptance among scholars. This study shows that the baptismal rites described in the second chapter of Pseudo-Dionysius’s Ecclesiastical Hierarchy and in the fifth century Ordo of Constantinople, recorded in the Euchologion Barberini gr. 336, have several unique features in common, such as the threefold renunciation of Satan, balanced by the threefold profession of faith, and the blessing of the baptismal water with the consecrated oil. These features are not attested by any other source contemporary or earlier than the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy and the material of the Ordo. Based on these unique similarities the author advances a new hypothesis that Pseudo-Dionysius describes a Constantinopolitan rite and very likely lived in Constantinople at some point in his career. Six objections to this hypothesis are considered and answered in the second part of the paper.

Keywords
Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, Euchologion (ms. Barberini Gr. 336), Constantinople, Corpus Dionysiacum, baptismal rite, renunciation of Satan

This note aims to shed a new light upon the Sitz of the mysterious author of the Corpus Dionysiacum (hereafter CD). While various historical personalities and locales (for example, Antioch and Alexandria) have been proposed, none of the hypotheses about Dionysius’s identity and location has to date gained the universal acceptance among scholars.¹ Although the evidence

¹ These hypotheses have been conveniently tabulated by R. Hathaway, Hierarchy and the
from the liturgy described in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (hereafter *EH*) has been previously discussed, no systematic attention has been called to the consideration of the rite of baptism as containing clues to Dionysius's carefully disguised *Sitz*. In this paper I argue that Dionysius describes a baptismal rite with several features, which are also found exclusively in the fifth century *Ordo* of Constantinople.

While my thesis is novel, my findings are consistent with two widely accepted facts: (1) the *CD* first surfaced during the Christological disputes of 520-540, especially during the meeting held in *Constantinople* between the Chalcedonians and the non-Chalcedonians in 532; (2) the rites described in the *EH* belong to the 'West Syrian' liturgical family. It should be pointed out that from the standpoint of the history of liturgy, fifth century Constantinopolitan rites belong to the 'West Syrian' group of rites, due to the strong influence of Antioch-on-the-Orontes upon the liturgical customs of the Second Rome during this period. I will proceed by first advancing evidence and arguments for my hypothesis (section 1) and then considering possible objections (section 2).

## 1. The *EH* II and the *Ordo* of Constantinople Compared

In the *EH* II, Dionysius describes the rite of the renunciation of Satan as follows:

He [the bishop] unties [the man's sandals] and has the deacons remove his garments. Then he [the bishop] puts him [the candidate] facing westward with his hands outstretched in a gesture of abhorrence. *Three times* (τρις) he bids him breathe his rejection of Satan and his abjuration of him. *Three times* (τρις) he speaks the words and the other repeats them. Then he turns him eastward with eyes raised and hands lifted to heaven and he commands him to submit to Christ and to all divinely granted sacred lore. This done, he calls upon him *three times*

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(τρις) to make his confession of faith and when the other has done this he prays for him, blesses him, and places his hands upon him.  

Dionysius mentions that the formula of renunciation is uttered three times, first by the minister and then by the candidate. This peculiar feature of the rite described by Dionysius has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention. This form of the rite is not found in any surviving western source prior to or contemporary with the CD. The threefold renunciation of Satan is attested in the west no earlier than mid-seventh century. It should be noted that the medieval western rites which contain the threefold renunciation have question-and-answer form (e.g. ‘Do you renounce Satan and all his...?—‘I do renounce him’), rather than the affirmation-and-repetition form described by Dionysius.

The only known eastern source that contains the threefold form of renunciation rite and most likely predates the CD is the Ordo of Constantinople, contained in the eight century manuscript, the Euchologion Barberini gr. 336. The liturgists agree that the rites recorded therein are considerably
earlier. Antoine Wenger and Thomas Finn date the relevant baptismal material of the *Euchologion Barberini* gr. 336 to the time shortly after the death of John Chrysostom (d. 407) or to the time of Proclus of Constantinople at the latest (434-446).\(^7\) This dating is also followed in the studies of Miguel Arranz, who observes that the rite was 'retouched' by the Constantinopolitan successors of John Chrysostom.\(^8\)

Two additional features lend further credence to the scholarly consensus that the core of the liturgical material in the *Barberini Euchologion* Gr. 336 belongs to the period no later than early sixth century. First, the lists of heretics from the rite of abjuration, recorded on folios 137r-144v, contain references to early and some fifth century heresiarchs, but not to any figures anathematized by the fifth ecumenical council (553) or later synods. Second, the text of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, recorded on folios 23r-38r, does not contain the sixth century hymn Μονογενής θεός, another indication of the fifth century core of this material. While Wenger, Finn, and Arranz point to mid-fifth century as the most plausible date of the renunciation-adhesion rite contained in the *Euchologion Barberini* gr. 336, one could more cautiously extend this formative time to late fifth, or even early sixth century, to the degree to which it is meaningful to speak of dating 'living literature' with any precision at all.

The relevant part of the *Ordo* runs as follows:

1. And after the 'Amen', the baptizand is stripped and his shoes are removed. The priest turns him to the west, raises [the candidates'] hands and says three times (γ'): 
2. 'I renounce Satan, and all his works and all his service and all his angels and all his pomp.' 
3. And the baptizand or his sponsor answers each time. 
4. And again the priest asks three times (γ'), saying: 'Have you renounced Satan?' 
5. And he replies: 'We have renounced.' 
6. And the priest says: 'Then blow upon him.' 
7. And the priest turns him to the east, his hands being lowered, and says to them three times (γ'): 
8. 'And I adhere to Christ. 
9. And I believe in one God, the Father Almighty…' and the rest.


10. And when the priest has spoken three times (γ'), again he asks them:
11. 'And have you adhered to Christ?'
12. And they answer: 'We have adhered.'
13. And the priest says: 'Worship him.'
14. And the priest says this prayer...

The convergence of the rites described in the EH II and in the Ordo of Constantinople is remarkable, since both assume the same pattern, sequence, and the same peculiar number of repeated liturgical actions: removal of clothes; removal of shoes; turning towards the west; outstretcing/raising of hands; the threefold affirmative renunciation uttered first by the minister and then repeated by the candidate; the threefold exsufflations, which in the Ordo accompany the threefold question-and-answer abjuration dialogue; the threefold profession of faith; the threefold adhesion dialogue (not mentioned in the EHII); prayer, blessing and the laying on of hands.

Two renunciation rites under discussion have minor differences. Specifically, Dionysius makes no explicit mention of the question-and-answer abjuration and adhesion dialogues. It is possible that Dionysius omitted references to these dialogues from his account as somewhat pleonastic. Despite this difference, the coincidence of very peculiar details makes the interdependence of these rites very plausible. More importantly, as noted earlier, the rites share at least two features the form of which is unique to these two documents and to no other earlier or contemporary liturgical source: the

9) Euchologion Barberini gr. 336, fol. 94v-94r, translated from the critical text in S. Parenti and E. Velkovska, eds., L'Euchologio Barberini gr. 336, pp. 106-7; the emphasis and numbering of ritual actions follows this critical edition. I also consulted the translation in E.C. Whitaker and M.E. Johnson, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy, pp. 117-118, which is based on the Greek text printed in F.C. Conybeare, Rituale Armenorum (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp. 395-6. In contrast to Parenti/Velkovska's edition, Conybeare's edition of the Greek original mistakenly omits "three times" (in Greek: γ') in 4), but retains the reference to 'three times' in 1), 7), and 10). Whitaker's translation omits 'three times' both in 4), apparently following Conybeare, and in (7), this time for no obvious reason.

A slightly different version of this rite appears in the same manuscript, Euchologion Barberini gr. 336, fol. 131v-132r as a part of the Good Friday Service. M. Arranz calls the rite quoted in this paper 'private' and the rite from the Good Friday Service 'patriarchal', observing that renunciation-adhesion portions of the rite overlap considerably to permit speaking of essentially the same ritual. See Arranz, 'Évolution des rites', p. 44; 'Les Sacrements de l'ancien Euchologue constantinopolitain', p. 397 and his Russian translation of these rites in Istoricheskie zametki o chinoposledovaniiah tainstv (Leningrad: Leningradskiaa Dukhovnaia Akademiia, 1979), 49-55.
threefold affirmative renunciation of Satan ritually counterbalanced by the threefold profession of faith.

But the parallels go further. Similar to the baptismal rite in the *EH*, the *Ordo* speaks of the pre-baptismal anointing begun by the priest in the threefold manner—on the forehead, breast, and back of the candidate—and the subsequent full-body anointing completed by the deacon. This description corresponds to Dionysius’s remark that ‘the hierarch begins the process of unction with a threefold sign of the cross, leaves it to the priests to cover the body of the man completely with the oil’ and meanwhile goes to consecrate the water with the holy *myron.* The only difference is that the ministers involved in these functions in the *EH* are the ‘hierarch’ and the assisting lower orders of the clergy, not the priest and the assisting deacons, as in the *Ordo*. However, a slightly different version of the same pre-baptismal ritual recorded on fol. 131r-132r of the *Euchologion Barberini* gr. 336 has the archbishop of Constantinople performing the rite with the assistance of the archdeacons, resembling the distribution of clerical functions in the *EH* II.

According to Thomas Finn, the *EH* ‘is the first West Syrian document to record the use of consecrated oil in the consecration of the baptismal water’. If the *Ordo* is, in fact, earlier than the *EH*, as Finn acknowledges, then this claim would have to be nuanced since the *Ordo* also describes in detail the threefold consecration of the baptismal water by pouring the consecrated oil in the cruciform way.

Finally, both the *Ordo* and the *EH* are silent about the kiss of peace after chrismation and before the Eucharist, exchanged between the minister in charge of initiation and the baptizand. In contrast, the kiss of peace at this juncture is an element unfailingly recorded by earlier sources. I take this omission as an indication that both the *Ordo* and the *EH* regard the kiss of peace in this ritual context as a part of the baptismal Eucharist, rather than as the conclusion of the baptismal rite proper.

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10) 396C; trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 203, emphasis is mine—P.G.
11) Thomas Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria*, p. 102. The calling of the baptizand’s name by the priests during the triple immersions appears to be a unique feature of the rite described in the *EH* 396C.
The similarity of the structures of the renunciation-adhesion-profession rites in the *EH* II and in the Constantinopolitan *Ordo*—especially the unique threefold renunciation of Satan followed by the threefold exsufflation, the threefold declaratory profession of faith, the threefold consecration of the baptismal water with the consecrated oil shared by both sources, the same sequence of the pre- and post-baptismal anointings, and the common omission of the kiss of peace—cumulatively point to Constantinople as Dionysius's *sitz*. Presumably, Dionysius would have been attached to a male monastery in which the 'hierarch' would have served on a fairly regular basis. Since there were more than fifty such monasteries in the area of Constantinople during this period, it would be difficult to pin down Dionysius's location with greater precision.14

In the next section I will consider six major objections to my hypothesis.

### 2. Objections Considered

First, it may be objected that the differences between the *Ordo* and the baptismal rite in the *EH* II are not negligible. Specifically, the *Ordo* mentions repeated exorcisms of the candidates and the exorcism of water, but Dionysius is silent about them. I admit that the total absence of any reference to exorcisms is a puzzling feature of Dionysius's presentation that is difficult to square with the rite of Constantinople. However, all major West Syrian liturgical sources—Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*—from the fourth century on attest to the presence of exorcistic practices. Dionysius's silence about exorcisms, while it has precedence in the earlier Syrian and Armenian sources, is quite exceptional for his time. This means that not only Constantinople, but most other main cities in West Syria would have to be excluded from consideration on these grounds. Since the community that Dionysius describes included the possessed, it is more plausible that the exorcisms in fact did take place, but Dionysius omitted these rites in his theological commentary.

Second, it could be objected that the *Ordo* cannot be dated with any precision. Earlier I pointed to the absence of the post-fifth century hierarchs from the abjuration lists, as well as to the absence of the mid-sixth

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century hymn from the text of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. The scholarly consensus of Arranz, Wenger, and Finn is that the core of the baptismal material of the Ordo was formed in the fifth century. Even if one more cautiously adopts a slightly later date of the early sixth century for the baptismal material of the Ordo, the unique threefold features of the baptismal rite described in the CD are not attested by any other extant source up to mid-seventh century, except the Ordo.

Third, it should be acknowledged that Dionysius was fond of discovering and constructing triads after the manner of Proclus the Neoplatonist (d. c. 485), whose views made an indelible mark on the Areopagite's theology. Is it possible that the threefold renunciation of Satan is a product of Dionysius's imagination, rather than a report about an actual practice? While this conjecture has some plausibility, the burden of proof is upon someone questioning the threefold form of renunciation, peculiarly attested by the Constantinopolitan Ordo, not upon those who take this ritual element at face value. If Dionysius invented the threefold renunciation, one would expect him to make much of it in his theological commentary. However, while interpreting the rite of renunciation and adhesion as an instance of the Neoplatonic union with the One in the theoria section of EHII, Dionysius does not dwell specifically on the threefold form of the rite. Since the Areopagite attributed no theological significance to the threefold form of the renunciation rite, there are no strong reasons for believing that this form was his invention.

Fourth, is it possible that the Ordo was further edited during the sixth century, at which stage the threefold elements were added under the influence of the CD? While such a hypothesis has some antecedent probability, the evidence for the direct literary dependence of this kind is much weaker than for a more modest case being made here. Significantly, the fact that the change was introduced into the Ordo of Constantinople, not that of Antioch or any other major city of the Empire, would point to the CD's peculiar relation to the liturgical rites of the capital. As I discussed at length elsewhere, the EH belongs to the genre of liturgical commentary, rather than of the church order literature. As a rule, the liturgical commentaries of this sort are based on the church orders and not vice versa. Dionysius avoids quoting the exact wording of the prayers, and often alludes to specific liturgical elements rather vaguely, perhaps not to compromise his

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claim to apostolic antiquity. If the later editors of the *Ordo* had used the *EH II*, they would have had to create the relevant prayers almost *de novo*—not a very likely move in this liturgically conservative period. To reemphasize the point made earlier, it would be odd for Dionysius to introduce a number of liturgical innovations without commenting at all on their theological significance. The elements in question are not doctrinally sensitive. There remains a possibility that the mysterious author of the *CD* himself introduced these elements into the *Ordo* of Constantinople. Such a possibility, while unprovable, does not overturn my hypothesis that the *CD* must be associated with the liturgical customs of the Eastern Empire's capital. It is certainly more likely that Dionysius is following an existing church order, rather than introducing new elements into one.

Fifth, it could be objected that my account does not take into consideration the evidence usually offered for the Antiochene provenance of the *CD*. At *EH 425C* and *436C*, the Areopagite alludes to the custom of reciting the creed during the Liturgy of the Faithful. There is evidence that Peter the Fuller was the first to introduce this custom in Antioch in 476. However, Bernard Capelle has shown that the evidence that this custom was an Antiochene innovation is contradictory. It is more plausible that the recitation of the creed was introduced into the liturgy for the first time under patriarch Timothy (d. 518) in Constantinople around 515. John of Scythopolis, who produced his scholia on the *CD* between 537 and 543, appears to have been aware that the custom was relatively new. In their study of the scholia Paul Rorem and John Lamoreaux endorse Capelle's conclusion and 'are inclined to push the date of the composition of the Dionysian corpus well into the sixth century'. Even if we more cautiously take the evidence for the Antiochene or Constantinopolitan origin of the custom of the recitation of the creed as disputed, Dionysius's allusions to the creed do not permit to tie his location conclusively to Antioch to the exclusion of Constantinople.

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Finally, it could be argued that the evidence for Constantinople provided here is insufficient to exclude Antioch from consideration. I would like to emphasize that no definitive case against Antioch can be made based on the evidence presented in this paper. Indeed, Antioch should not be excluded, since there was a lot of crosspollination between the liturgical practices of Antioch and Constantinople, especially during the archbishopric of John Chrysostom and John of Antioch (years of archbishopric 429-441). However, neither the practice of the threefold affirmative renunciation of Satan, nor the threefold consecration of the baptismal water with the consecrated oil, is attested in Antioch, or in any other locale, except Constantinople, during this time period. If one accepts Antioch as Dionysius's sitz, one is left with no convincing explanation of the provenance of the liturgical peculiarities under discussion. Therefore, we have more grounds for believing that the EH reflects the liturgical customs of the Empire's capital than those of Antioch. Extrapolating this evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that Dionysius the Areopagite could be with greater justification referred to as Dionysius of Constantinople.
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