



The Role of Candelae and Lampadae in the Processions of *Hypapantē* and *Candlemas*

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This paper focuses on the evolution of the feast of Hypapantē/Candlemas in Byzantium and in Western Europe and explores the reasons that led to integrating the use of lighting devices in the relevant celebration.

Keywords: Ancient History - Archaeology - Lighting - Candlemas - Byzantine period - Medieval period

On the second day of February, Christianity celebrates the presentation of Christ in the Temple to complete Mary's purification, which had to take place 40 days after she gave birth¹. Although the relevant passage in the Bible (Luke 2, 22-23) includes a reference associating the feast with both these events: "When the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were fulfilled, they brought him up to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord", the names that have prevailed for the feast in both Western and Eastern Church have nothing to do either with the Purification of the Blessed Virgin or with the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. In Western Europe, the name for this Christian festival is Candlemas (Lat. *festum candelarum* or *luminum*)². In the Greek Church, it is known as *Hypapantē toy Kyriou*, "the meeting of the Lord," with Simeon and Anna³.

Although sources indicate that the feast was established during the reign of Justin (518-527 AD)⁴, the pilgrim Egeria witnessed in the late 4th century (ca 384), in Jerusalem, on 14 February, the fortieth day after Epiphany, the celebration of the Meeting of the Lord with Simeon, without however giving this feast a proper name⁵.

The earliest name of the feast, *heortē katharsion*, the Festival of Cleansing, is referred to in the first homily of Hesychius, presbyter of Jerusalem, on Hypapantē (5th century)⁶. However, rather soon, emphasis shifted to *hypantesis*, "the meeting of the Lord," with Simeon and Anna⁷.

The earliest descriptions of the feast of Hypapantē originate from Jerusalem, indicating that this is where it was established⁸. The first indications on the celebration of Hypapantē in Constantinople date from the 6th century, and they all associate its dissemination with Justinian.

According to the *Chronicle* of Theophanes, in 534, during the reign of Justinian⁹, it was decided that the feast of Hypapantē would be celebrated in Constantinople on 2 February to align it with the new date for the feast of the Birth of Christ set on 25 December¹⁰.

Hypapantē and Adventus

Cyril of Skythopolis in his *Life of St. Theodosios Koinobiarches* (423-529 AD) mentions: "Then the blessed Hikelia, having practiced all manner of piety, was the first to introduce the celebration of the Presentation of our Lord (hypapantē) with candles: 'meta kēriōn ginesthai tēn hypapantēsīn tou sōteros hēmōn theou'"¹¹.

This reference was considered to have probably being based on the fact that Hikelia participated in a religious procession from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and back, in which the participants were holding candles. Based on this fact, this procession was considered "an *occursus domini*, comparable to the honours given to civilian and ecclesiastical dignitaries visiting a city (*adventus principis, parousia*)"¹², and it appears to be reflecting the ceremony of Adventus, a ceremonial arrival rooted in ancient society and religion. The Byzantine Adventus ceremonies were held to greet bishops, officials and saint's relics¹³.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins, or the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) (Fig. 1), is a notable example reminiscent of the Adventus ceremonies, in which the roles of the Emperor and its courtiers are taken by figures of the Christian religion¹⁴. It would appear that something similar also happened to Hypapantē.

Taking into account: 1. that there were two types of processions in Rome: participatory and person-centered processions¹⁵; 2. that it would appear that Constantinople adopted the more person-centered processional practice

of Rome, when the imperial court became part of the life of the city¹⁶; 3. that, in Late Antiquity, when politics and religion were not as separable as they are today, these processions were civil affairs as well. They had political and propagandistic overtones¹⁷; and 4. the view that the presence of lights promoted the image of the emperor as a representative of Christ on Earth¹⁸, one could argue that the carrying of candles in the procession of the Hypapantē (see in detail below) should be associated with the fact that it referred to an Adventus ceremony, whose conduct in this manner also bestowed honour upon the officials and above all the emperor, when they participated in it.

On the other hand, the introduction of Candlemas in the West is somewhat obscure. Candlemas spread slowly in the West¹⁹ and was associated with the pagan Februalia celebrated in ancient Rome at about the same period²⁰. Pagan antiquity had already attributed to feasts celebrated during this particular period of the year a purification value also reflected in the Latin verb “februare” meaning “to purify”²¹.

Attempts have been made to associate the feast with the Amburbia (see below) as well as with the Lupercalia celebrated in Rome on 15 February²², but this view does not appear to have been corroborated to this day by any contemporary written sources²³.

The feast of Candlemas was introduced in Rome in the second half of the 7th century²⁴ and this particularly late introduction, as compared to the East, may be attributed to the strong pagan tradition prevailing in Rome²⁵.

The 8th-century *Gelasian Sacramentary*, which embodies a much older tradition, mentions it under the title of Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The procession held on this day was introduced by Pope Sergius I (687-701)²⁶.

The *Ordo Romanus XX* (dating from around 780-790) describes what happened on the day of this feast in the Western Church. The procession would go from Saint Hadrian-in-the-Forum to Saint Mary Major - where from the mid-5th century there was a mosaic depicting the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Fig. 2) - exactly as had been instituted by Pope Sergius I. Moreover, all the assistants to this procession were carrying lighted candles²⁷.

Use of candles

The feast's illustration has relied on the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2, 22-32), where there is no reference to the use of any lighting devices and, therefore, lighting devices are rarely depicted²⁸. There exist exceptions, however, such as the miniature in Armenian manuscript MS 404 (172), dated 1362²⁹ (Fig. 3) and the painting of Hans Holbein the Elder, dated 1500-1501 (Fig. 4).

Medieval scholars saw in the candles carried by the participants in the litany a reminder of the verse in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2, 32): “A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel”³⁰, possibly representing an attempt to associate the use of lighting

devices in a pre-existing pagan feast with the Christian Candlemas.

During the first post-Christian centuries, Christianity adopted those Roman feasts which made use of lights, since the Roman tradition had been transferred to the East by Constantine the Great, who became a supporter of the new religion³¹. In this manner, the new religion not only found a whole array of lighting possibilities, but it also took advantage of a series of rituals associated with ritualistic customs which had developed in the Greco-Roman world³². In several instances, this has resulted in the Christian candle-bearing during Holy Mass reminding ritualistic ceremonies³³.

It seems that, once candles had been accepted into the church, after the initial objections and oppositions had been set aside, they have been used in ceremonies which, although initially pagan, have been adopted by Christians, after having acquired a Christian character and the relevant symbolic value³⁴.

One of the main reasons for the prevalence of bee-wax candles appears to have probably been the need to adapt the torchlight ceremonies of Greco-Roman antiquity to the Christian environment. In the process, it became imperative to replace the smoky, smelly torches with cleaner-burning, sweet smelling wax candles, since the majority of the Christian processions took place inside the churches³⁵. Indeed, it has been suggested that the first definite use of wax candles can be traced back to the Church festival of Candlemas³⁶.

In the 4th and 5th century, when Christians no longer felt in danger and their disagreements with the ideas of the Gnostics had reached specific conclusions, the way was opened for the Church Fathers to write about the symbolism of the light and the candle³⁷.

The name *candela*³⁸ derives from the verb *candeo*=shine, glitter, glisten³⁹ (cognates: Sanskrit *cand-* “to give light, shine,” Greek *kandaros* “coal”)⁴⁰ and is of a general nature⁴¹, like the Greek *lampas*⁴². Both could be characterized as the equivalent of modern English lamp, a word for every object giving light. In Late Antiquity these words were used to describe torches and later to describe wax candles.

On a 6th century manuscript miniature representing the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Fig. 1), we can see torches. The evolution through time of the term *candela* (*lampas*) can be demonstrated by comparing two representations distant about a thousand years from each other. On the representation dated from the 6th century the *lampadae* or *candelae* are torches, while on the one dating from 1600 AD they are wax candles (Fig. 5)⁴³.

Use of candles during Hypapantē

The association of Hypapantē with the use of candles is made manifest by the reference of Cyril of Skythopolis in his *Life of St. Theodosios Koinobiarches*⁴⁴.

In addition, in a homily on Hypapantē, attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem⁴⁵, Cyril encourages the faithful in these



words: «Οὕτως σήμερον φαιδροὶ φαιδρῶς τὰς λαμπάδας κοσμήσωμεν· οὕτως, ὡς υἱοὶ φωτός, τοὺς κηροὺς τῷ φωτὶ τῷ ἀληθινῷ Χριστῷ προσάγωμεν»⁴⁶ (Thus, today let us be merry and merrily decorate the torches; thus, like sons of light, let us bring the candles to the light of the true Christ).

Another relevant testimony, although its origin and dating remain unknown, is the introduction to the homiletic version of the relevant part of the commentary of Saint Cyril of Alexandria in the Gospel of Luke: «... καὶ ἐπειδὴ πάντες προθύμως συνήλθετε, τῆς φαιδρότητος τῆς Δεσποτικῆς ἑορτῆς εἰς τοῦτο συναθροισάσης μετὰ φαιδρῶν τῶν λαμπάδων, φαιδρῶς πανηγυρίσωμεν...»⁴⁷ (...and because you have all readily gathered, the merriness of this feast of the Lord having also gathered with merry candles, let us merrily celebrate...).

Lastly, it is worth noting that the ancient name of the feast in the Georgian liturgical tradition was “lamproba”, meaning the feast of the lamps, and that in Sabbaitic Typica there are references to the use of candles during the feast⁴⁸.

Use of candles in Candlemas

In Western Europe, the name of the feast of Candlemas is clearly related to the Latin word *candela*⁴⁹, and in all Romance languages the name of the feast is related to the *candelae*⁵⁰ thus revealing the strong tradition underlying their use and the possible substitution of a pagan feast relating to the cult of light with a Christian feast⁵¹. Indeed, it appears that the memory of this substitution was so intense that even much later references by Pope Innocent XII (1615-1700) support this view. In one of his predications he expresses the view that the Christian feast has been established to replace a pagan feast, possibly the Amburbia⁵², an ancient Roman festival for purifying the city, in which the participants, carrying burning torches would walk around the city in memory of the search of Persephone by Demeter⁵³. Since – according to Innocent – the Church Fathers could not get rid of the custom of carrying candles, they determined that Christians would carry such candles to honour the Virgin Mary⁵⁴.

The Ordo Romanus XX (dates from around 780-790) mentions that all the assistants to the procession from Saint Hadrian-in-the-Forum to Saint Mary Major, were carrying lighted candles⁵⁵.

In the West, the Candlemas ceremony was characterized by the procession of all participants carrying candles which had been blessed by the priests and which they subsequently kept in their possession⁵⁶. The blessing of candles began to occur in various local “supplements” in the late 9th and early 10th centuries. Vincent has claimed that the oldest testimony of the custom of blessing candles dates from the 12th century⁵⁷. This is a feature lacking in the East⁵⁸. The custom of lighting those candles had survived in rural areas in France until the early 20th century⁵⁹. It appears that, in the West, the association of the feast with *candelae* has been decisive, as suggested by the fact that

even today the feast is still celebrated with candles.

Conclusions

The difference between the festival as celebrated in the East and the West is that the former is a festival of Christ, while the latter is pre-eminently a festival of the Virgin Mother⁶⁰.

However, in the Byzantine world the initial focus of the feast was also probably on the purification of the Virgin Mary (*heortē katharsiōn*, the Festival of Cleansing), and this may have led to it being considered one of the five Marian Great Feasts. The fact that in Byzantine years Holy Mass on the day of Hypapantē was celebrated in the Church of the Virgin at Vlachernai suggests that, although the feast was related to the Lord, it was considered to be a feast of the Virgin Mary by the Byzantines⁶¹.

The feast was initially consolidated in the East and subsequently in the West. Although both in the East and the West the feast has been associated in Late Antiquity with purification, as centuries went by the notion of “purification” has prevailed in the West, whereas the notion of “Hypapantē” has prevailed in the East⁶² associating the feast with the Adventus ceremony, while maintaining certain elements of the initial approach of the feast, given that in Byzantine years it continued to be included among the important feasts in honour of the Virgin Mary.

In light of the above, it may be seen that the history of the feast of Hypapantē of the Lord is indeed not static but rather dynamic. It displays evolution and adaptability to the functional needs of each place and time and it is associated with Christmas both from a calendar and from a conceptual point of view⁶³.

In any event, one way or another, the feast of Hypapantē/Candlemas is associated with ceremonies held with the use of lighting devices.

Notes:

1. According to Mosaic law, a mother who had given birth to a male child was considered unclean for forty days (Leviticus 12, 2-8).
2. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: a dictionary of arts, sciences, literature and general information (c1910-1922)*, s.v. Candlemas.
3. Walsh, 1897, pp. 168-169.
4. Migne, 1857, 110, 773.
5. Wilkinson, 1981, p. 128; *Catholic Encyclopedia (1913)*, Volume 3, s. v. Candlemas by *Frederick George Holweck*; Alexopoulos, 2007, pp. 511-512, 515-516, notes 73, 74; Mateos & Eglise orthodoxe, 1962, v. 1, 220-224; Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*. I.27, 1: 147-156; Groen, 2001, and in particular regarding the events that have had an influence on the celebration of the Presentation of the Lord, pp. 346-347.
6. Aubineau, 1978; Migne, 1857, 93:1468B.
7. Groen, 2001, p. 348, note 13; Alexopoulos, 2007, pp. 511-

513.

8. Alexopoulos, 2007, p. 514; Stevenson, 1990, p. 51, note 20.

9. Migne, 1857, 108:488B.

10. Migne, 1857, 147:292A.

11. "Vita Theodosii" in E. Schwartz, *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis* (=Text und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Litteratur 49/2) (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1939) 235-241, here 236; Groen, 2001, 350 and note 16; Stevenson, 1990, p. 51.

12. Groen, 2001, p. 350 and note 17; Brakmann, 2000.

13. Kazhdan & Talbot, 1991, v. 1, pp. 25-26, s.v. ADVENTUS; Holum & Vikan, 1979, p. 115 and note 6; Parani, 2013, p. 165, note 33.

14. For "The Christianization of Imperial Victory Celebrations", see McCormick, 1986, pp. 100-111.

15. Baldovin, 1987, p. 237.

16. Baldovin, 1987, p. 237, note 30.

17. Baldovin, 1987, p. 211.

18. Parani, 2013, p. 175.

19. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), Volume 3, s. v. Candlemas by Frederick George Holweck; Stevenson, 1990, p. 56.

20. Walsh, 1897, pp. 168-169.

21. Vincent, 2004, p. 461.

22. Merlo, 1915, p. 8.

23. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), Volume 3, s.v. Candlemas by Frederick George Holweck; *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: a dictionary of arts, sciences, literature and general information (c 1910-1922)*, s.v. Candlemas.

24. Vincent, 2004, p. 461.

25. Baldovin, 1987, p. 237, note 30.

26. Stevenson, 1990, p. 57, note 45.

27. Stevenson, 1990, pp. 59-60, note 56; Baldovin, 1987, pp. 137-138, 160, note 78.

28. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1900, p. 90.

29. Der Nersessian & Mekhitarian, 1986, fig. 70.

30. Vincent, 2004, p. 461.

31. Seidel, 1996, p. 25.

32. Seidel, 1996, σ. 25.

33. See Pallas, *Archaeologica*, p. 73, note 3, for the relevant references. See also Seidel, *Die Kerze*, p. 25.

34. Martigny, 1865, p. 152, s.v. cierge.

35. Motsianos, 2011, p. 97.

36. Forbes, 1966, p. 141.

37. Seidel, 1996, σ. 26; Reddé, 1995, p. 61.

38. Daremberg, Charles, & Saglio, Edm. 1873, s.v. candel.

39. Lewis, 1891, p. 105, s.v. candeo.

40. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=candle>; Adams, 1999, p. 150.

41. Chrzanowski, 2006, pp. 361-388.

42. Liddell, Henry George, Scott, Robert, & Drisler, Henry 1883, s.v. λαμπάς.

43. Motsianos, 2012, p. 264.

44. "Vita Theodosii" in E. Schwartz, *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis* (=Text und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Litteratur 49/2) (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1939) 235-241, here 236; Groen, 2001, 350 and note

16; Stevenson, 1990, p. 51.

45. Migne, 1857, 33:1176C-1204A.

46. Migne, 1857, 33:1201B.

47. Migne, 1857, 77:1041A; Alexopoulos, 2007, p. 519, note 90; Stevenson, 1990, p. 51.

48. Alexopoulos, 2007, pp. 519-520, notes 92, 93.

49. Vincent, 2004, p. 541 and details about the chandelier in the Western world, pp. 460-468.

50. See, Merlo, 1915: Candelalia or Candelalium, italian=Candelora, french=Chandelier, spanish=Candelaria, english=Candlemas, german=Lichtmeß (Mariä Lichtmeß) (Licht = light), dutch = Lichtmis (Maria Lichtmis).

51. Walsh, 1897, p. 168.

52. Smith & Anthon, 1878, s.v. amburbium

53. Merlo, 1915, p. 8. Indeed, the use of torches is linked to the purifying role of fire.

54. Walsh, 1897, p. 168.

55. Stevenson, 1990, pp. 59-60, note 56; Baldovin, 1987, pp. 137-138, 160, note 78.

56. Vincent, 2004, p. 64.

57. Vincent, 2004, p. 460, notes 1-2.

58. Stevenson, 1990, pp. 60, note 57.

59. Vincent, 2004, p. 460, notes 1-2.

60. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: a dictionary of arts, sciences, literature and general information (c1910-1922)*, s.v. Candlemas; Kazhdan & Talbot, 1991, v. 2, pp. 961-962, s.v. HYPAPANTE; Stevenson, 1990, p. 53.61. Kazhdan & Talbot, 1991, v. 2, pp. 961-962, s.v. HYPAPANTE; Alexopoulos, 2007, pp. 511, 515-516, notes 73, 74; Mateos & Eglise orthodoxe, 1962, v. 1, 220-224; Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*. I.27, 1: 147-156.

62. Stevenson, 1990, p. 49.

63. Alexopoulos, 2007, p. 520.

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