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Icon Creation in Basic Assumption Groups

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Abstract

This paper concerns psychology of attribution by devotees onto a presumed person-an icon. Bion's theory of the basic assumption group is explored in relation to two icons: Mary the mother of Jesus and King Arthur. In each case there is a small amount of history, which has been amplified by devotional groups, operation in either BaD or BaF mode. Mary has been subject to idealisation and projective identification, particularly in the Marianismo

phase after the conquest of the Aztecs. Arthur may be a condensation of five historical figures. He represents the self-image of Anglo Normans and their claim to a legitimate line of kings on the throne of England. There have been recent attempts by feminist groups to create icons from Æthelflæd, Boudicca and Britannia. A general model is offered of the ability of groups to define reality by consensus.

Keywords: Idealisation, Marianismo, Icon, King Arthur, Basic Assumption

Introduction

The scope of the current paper is the psychology of attribution by devotees onto a presumed person – an icon. Religious and political beliefs and the visual aspects of icons are outside this scope. Bion's theory of group analysis and the psychoanalytic concepts of idealisation, projection and identification will be used to describe the relationship between devotees and the presumed person onto whom they attribute.

The group analyst Wilfred Bion calls fight/ flight one of three "basic assumptions" that can allow a group to cohere. (The other two basic assumptions are "leadership" and "pairing".) The perceived threat can vary from imminent realistic danger to wild fantasy. The most frequent threat attribution in the creation of a new icon may be the absence of positive attribution, which might also be called "strokes", "mirroring", "affirmation" or "empowerment" and its absence "invisibility". A "group" according to Bion operates face to face and everyone can be heard. The member can open their self boundaries and go with the flow of the collective. The optimum size for such a "small group" is seven. Group dynamics start to break down above 15 and the level of anger increases in a "large" group. Contributions of members may not be picked up by the next speaker so the sense of "not being heard" increases. Psychological processes of narcissistic rejection, projection, introjection, identification and idealisation become increasingly frequent as members try to achieve validation for themselves. We will look first at idealisation.

In the early Christian church, the first object of veneration was Jesus and the later object was Mary, the mother of Jesus. In mediaeval times icons usually referred to visual images, particularly in Eastern Orthodox churches. There was heated debate about whether a visual image should be venerated – iconolatry - or be banned – iconoclasm - or be treated as a symbol of the venerated person. An "iconic sign" in the 20th century used to indicate that the form was thought to be prototypical of its meaning in some way. For example, "Coca-Cola" used Spencerian script and a distinctive bottle shape, widely recognised throughout the world (Eco, 1975) [5]. The word "icon" in the 21st century is applied to anyone with a high approval rating as a singer, entertainer, or TV performer, gay spokespersons and women admired by feminists. Visual images are usually present, but not definitive.

Idealisation is a psychological process that elevates the status and conceals the faults of a historic person. The four Marian dogmas of Catholicism - perpetual virginity, motherhood of God, immaculate conception and assumption into heaven, show very strong idealisation. Mary's actual words in the bible are rather few, occurring only in the magnificat, the annunciation and two other short utterances, and only in the gospels of Luke and John. Devotees are themselves elevated by association with the iconic person. The devout female believer who identifies with Mary removes from herself the negative aspects of sexual intercourse and elevates motherhood to a divine level. Mary the presumed mother of Jesus is believed by Catholic and Orthodox Christians to confer blessings on the devout. The word "projection" could be used when talking of idealisation, though this implies a process that is deeply unconscious, whereas an "attribution" can be corrected by new conscious

information.

Apart from idealisation, the other psychoanalytic construct of relevance is projective identification. This combines two Freudian defence mechanisms: projection and identification. The individual projects qualities that are unacceptable to the self onto another person, and vilifies them in that other. This splitting of good and bad feelings is a particularly bizarre concept for psychologists accustomed to adult cognitive terms. It may be illustrated by an infant cutting teeth. Parents are familiar with the problem of trying to soothe an infant with sore gums, which is often ineffective as the child pushes the adult away. In the perspective of Melanie Klein, the infant experiences pain in the mouth as being external and inflicted by a tormenting witch, who must be destroyed so that the kind mother can return. Introjection is the reverse of projection, in which we attribute admired qualities to ourselves and believe ourselves to be characterized by them appropriately and justifiably. The infant does not yet have a concept of self and other, so can split and project bad feelings in order to keep all the good feelings inside. Older children reluctantly and sadly accept they are mostly good but with some negative aspects.

The lexicology of *εἰκών*, *eikon*, 'image' needs consideration, as early Christian church spoke Greek. Iconolatry is worship of the visual image, the opposite of iconoclasm, which meant literal breaking of visual images before its modern metaphorical sense. Both extreme positions, iconolatry and iconoclasm, were rejected in 787 by the Second Council of Nicaea, which decided that holy icons should neither be destroyed, nor be fully worshiped, but should be venerated as only symbolic representations of God, angels, or saints. Islam acquired converts from eastern Christianity and Zoroastrianism and initially adopted icons on coins and art, but came after half a century to ban all depictions of human figures. This has the effect that God can be known only through speech, supposedly dictated via Gabriel to the last prophet. God is therefore very remote and powerful and not to be conflated with any human leader, except as a male.

Marianismo is a term that defines standards for the female gender role in Hispanic American folk cultures. It is dialectic of machismo. It revolves around the veneration for feminine virtues like interpersonal harmony, inner strength, self-sacrifice, family, passivity, sexual purity, and self-silencing and morality among Hispanic women. The term was first used by political scientist Evelyn Stevens in her 1973 essay "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo". Machismo is "exaggerated aggressiveness in intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships." Although submissive in behaviour, the devotee feels herself "semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men."

Stevens believes that marianismo is rooted in the awe and worship of female bodies, particularly in the context of pregnancy, exemplified by early cultures. Female deities were widespread until Christianity, which did not produce a woman-figure to venerate until around 431 CE, people began to exalt the popular figure of Mary, Mother of Jesus. The iconicity of the mother of Jesus then took the Greek word *parthenos* ('young woman') and wrongly translated it as 'virgin'. The final purity characteristic was the assumption, in which Mary was deemed to have been directly to heaven. This was added with no historical basis in the 11th century. A further big increment in projections

onto Mary took place during the Spanish colonisation of the Americas. A native American convert to Catholicism claimed to have had a vision of Mary at Guadalupe, now part of Mexico City. Stevens coined the word *Marianismo* and drew her data from Mexican women, perhaps mainly from the middle class.

Denigration may use the same vocabulary about the iconic person, but by people outside the circle of devotion. "*Madre de dios*" and "*puta tu madre*" are routinely used as expletives for other drivers in Spanish and *putin* (French) and *kurwa* (Polish) are very general denigrations. In Quebecois the references to body products *foutre* and *merde* are less offensive than *tabarnack* 'tabernacle', *calisse* 'chalice' and *calvaire* 'calvary'. Blasphemy is not now an offence in Britain, though it can carry the death penalty in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Indeed, we have forgotten that "cripes", "jiminy cricket" and "jeez" were once minced oaths, as "sugar" is currently. The associations in slurs "woman" – "of low worth" – "whore" – "associated with the devil" are particularly strong in countries that are, or were once, Catholic. Protestant leaders may consider devotion as Mariolatry. Formerly Protestant Scandinavia uses slurs associated with a bad divine object – the devil. The Danish swearword *diafla* 'devil and Swedish *fån* 'devil', have the same effect as 'go to hell' or 'fuck off'. The lexicography of such pejoratives is analysed in more detail in Conduit (2022)^[4]. There may be a dialectical relation between idealisation and denigration. The two gender roles are forced apart without the possibility of androgyny. The veneration of Mary may have been mainly by women, so males excluded from the devotion used the same vocabulary as slurs. This is a hypothesis for later study.

Feminism has been influential in the naming as icons historical female figures who "succeeded in a male-dominated world". One such was Rosalind Franklin, who did radiographic research that contributed to the description of DNA, but died in 1958, before the famous Nobel awards in 1962. Scientists can take pride if their names are preserved as laws or effects, rather than by the narcissistic ceremony of receiving a piece of an inert metal funded by Nobel's sale of armaments. Numerous university facilities and features of planets have been named after Franklin. However, it has been argued that she was "awkward", refusing to engage in model building or share the intellectual property of King's College with her supervisor Maurice Wilkins. Her sister Jenifer Glynn rejects heroic status. So, despite the abundance of recent history, iconic status for Franklin is still highly contentious.

"*Æthelflæd: Lady of the Mercians*" is a Youtube film in which Professor Michael Wood repeats the attempt to advance this 10th century woman as an icon. Prof. Wood espouses "creative history" and believes that the four million words of Old English that have survived may include biographical details about *Æthelflæd* in prayer books, but "they have been erased [sic] from male-dominated history". Historians generally say, reluctantly, that biographies cannot be written for Old English times. It is reasonably clear that after her husband *Æthelred* died in 911, *Æthelflæd* was known as "Lady of the Mercians" until her death in 918. It is unclear what roles *Æthelflæd* and her brother Edward, king of Wessex, took in the building of burhs in Mercia, the raid on Bardney in 909, or the capture of Derby from Danes in 917. While one historian Ian Walker says "the accession of a female ruler in Mercia is

one of the most unique [sic] events in early medieval history", another, Nick Higham, thinks medieval and modern writers have been "so captivated by her that Edward's reputation has suffered unfairly in comparison". We will probably never know biographies of Anglo Saxons. The status of an icon is determined by the devotion it attracts and the affirmation generated for the devotees, not the historical facts.

The most implausible candidate for iconicity is Boudicca, queen of the Iceni tribe. As a general who sought battle with Rome and superiority that might have been as high as a 13:1, then lost catastrophically, she is a nominee for the title of worst military leader in history. Tacitus estimates 80,000 Iceni dead against 400 Romans. The Observer journalist Barnett (2023) ^[1] is enthusiastic for Boudicca as a feminist icon, but does not consider her a Celtic icon. Boudicca was no doubt in unfocussed rage about the public rape of her daughters. Rape, of males or females, was considered as an expression of dominance by Rome, but this particular command of a Roman officer may have been to provoke her. She chose to have a "street party" the night before the battle and to pose for spectators on a wicker chariot and there is no evidence she had a battle plan.

Having once accepted suzerainty to Rome, the Iceni revolted in 61 CE and burnt Roman Colchester and London. Boudicca rallied them and conjoined the Trinovantes but not the Cantiaci. Governor Suetonius Paulinus was caught badly off balance, with several legions in Anglesey, but marched them along Watling Street in the direction of London. Tacitus says the location was in a "narrow defile with a forest at the rear", which implies a Welsh battle site, perhaps with the river on one flank. Watling Street is on level ground most of the way from London, with a possible site with high ground at Mancetter, until it starts to follow the river Dee near modern Llangollen. Whatever the location, it is improbable that the Iceni could not have encircled the legions if they had planned to. The Iceni probably knew of the flank attack tactics of Arminius at Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, when three Roman legions were annihilated. Tacitus' Annals say Boudicca taunted the men that they "must win or perish" but describes no Iceni formation at all. The natural formation for poorly-armed and trained infantry would have been as hoplites. The Iceni could have cut more ash poles than there were Romans and practised the schiltron tactic later perfected by other Celts – William Wallace and Swiss pikemen. They could have surrounded the 15,000 legionaries on four sides and simply pushed until the Romans stumbled. Prisoners could have been taken and used in negotiations before the inevitable Roman retaliation. In the absence of Iceni leadership, the legions' deployment started with javelins thrown at 40 yards. Cavalry with lances attacked the flanks, although these equites typically numbered only 250 per legion. The Roman slaughter was followed by fortification in the area that is now Norfolk, which remained sparsely populated for decades afterwards.

Britannia is the most ambiguous icon of all. Rome chose a beautiful female figure wearing a Corinthian helmet, carrying a trident and a large oval shield, which are more ceremonial than military. The word is thought to come from the Brittonic word *Pretani* for Great Britain and was chosen as the name for the Roman province after the conquests of 43CE, with coins issued under Hadrian soon after 61 CE. Britannia appears to be based on Minerva, a goddess of

justice rather than war. Romans equated this icon with Greek Athena. The British Empire in Victorian times then adopted the same Roman image. Boudicca was somehow paired with Britannia as icons, despite her revolt against empire (Vannan, 2021) ^[12] and the catastrophic massacre. Previously Romans had spoken of the island as Albion, probably meaning 'white' as in "cliffs of Dover. Curiously, the Gaelic Celts who migrated from the north of Ireland would adopt the Latin words *Alba* and *Scotii* for their new settlement in Dál Riata and these remain the modern Gaelic words for Scotland and the Scots.

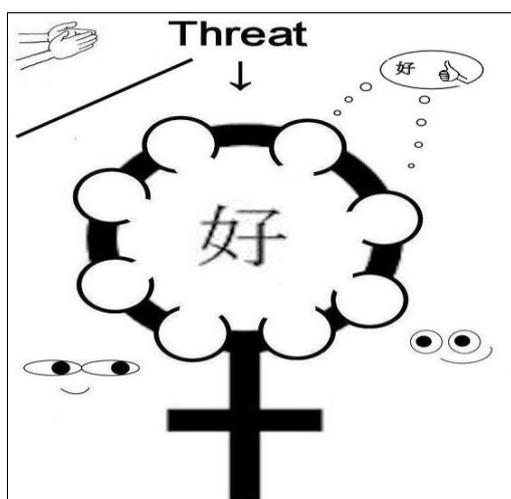
Another appropriation of historical figures was achieved by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his book *Historia Regum Britanniae*, an Anglo-Norman narrative of Britain starting with Brutus of Troy and finishing with Cadwaladr in the 7th century. Up to 50% of the monarchs, including King Lear and King Arthur, may be fictional, invented by Geoffrey. Russell (2017) ^[8] argues that his sources were the oral histories of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes and the king-lists of several post-Roman dynasties and synthesised Arthur from five historical characters as a king of "England", though partly Breton and not "Saxon". Ambrosius Aurelianus is the first of five, because he gained the victory at *Gweith Vadon* ('Battle of Badon') against Anglo-Saxons with the most likely date as 496 CE. This figure has some provenance in the writings of Welsh authors in Latin, the *Annales Cambriae* and the *Historia Brittonum*. Arviragus is the second, 24% of the source of Arthur according to Russell. He subjugated the Orkneys in the 1st century CE and married Ganhumara (Guinevere). Constantine the Great, Magnus Maximus and Cassivellaunus make up the other three fifths. This leaves only the invasions of Iceland and Norway, which seem to be Geoffrey's own fantasy.

Geoffrey's Latin text from around 1150 then formed the basis of the text in Norman French, *Roman de Brut* by Wace around 1155, and text *Brut* by Laghamon in a kind of the Old English some time after 1205. About half of the 16,095 lines in the latter are a greatly expanded version of King Arthur. The popularity of Arthur in the English language continued to increase with Sir Thomas Malory's *le morte Darthur*, despite its having been written in prison with rather bad French. The attributions by this time concerns knightly valour and honour, cavalry methods and other concerns of the Anglo-Normans, and not the battle methods of the 6th century. Geoffrey was working alone without the pressure of a face-to-face group, but heavily identified with the Anglo-Norman minority in England. He seems to have contrived to condense five historical figures from British and Roman history into one Anglo-Norman "Arthur" icon. Today this would be seen as fraudulent. Freud used the terms condensation and displacement to describe the formation of dream images. At the risk of being flippant, Geoffrey's merging of five historical persons into one icon might be described as just such a condensation.

Feminists have been very active in creation of icons in recent decades. The Women's Room suddenly advanced a demand for Jane Austen to be depicted on the £10 note, claiming that "she was about to be airbrushed out of history" (Guardian, 2015) ^[6]. Austen dominates the field of the romantic novel in the UK, has an enormous list of BBC TV series, and is the 77th best-known English person. She never married and her heroines apparently do not have sex. Austen was immediately adopted by the Bank of England, but the £10 note then erases all men and upstages two other female

icons. Queen Elizabeth II was one of the most popular female leaders in the world, but the Women's Room made no reference to her. They also ignored Frances Teresa Stuart as the model for the icon Britannia of most English currency after 1672. Stuart was famous at the time for refusing to become the mistress of Charles II, which should give her enduring iconic status.

Having looked at four icons, we are in a position to offer a hypothesis about the psychology through which devotees enhance themselves by projective identification onto an icon. The graphic illustrates the hypothesis. Narcissistically vulnerable people (most of us) are seeking "affirmations" (or "strokes", "mirroring", "empowerment" etc.) - enhancement of self-esteem. The absence of affirmations is most commonly described as "invisibility", but also "brickbats". A "thumbs up" sign (👍) is used in the graphic to show affirmation of a group member by another. The next element is an advertising "hook" is baited with a candidate icon who is presented as victim of deprivation of the approval to which she was entitled. Candidate devotees assemble to learn about the female (usually) historical figure. Group members are united by the basic assumption fight or flight against an external threat; for icons, the threat is typically males who have "rendered invisible" or "erased" the icon. Individuals project onto and identify with the icon; in doing so, some control of the self is yielded to the group so that the self-boundary is now ♀ and projection and introjection become more frequent. The focus of approval is the centre, the icon fantasy; she is the Chinese character 好, 'good', which is in turn composed of 女 'woman' and 子 'child'. Once the circle of devotees has cohered, observers can see the goodness of the icon and the group and clap hands to affirm. The icon is idealised so "bad" characteristics are excluded. Negative feelings - rage, guilt, sadness, revenge etc. are projected outside the group, perhaps onto the "threat", who also hides the affirming applauding hands. Devotees then introject the icon and experience enhanced self-esteem in the shared thought bubble.



The recurrent feminist drive to iconise female historical figures might be seen as a screen onto which members of group can project their needs for affirmation. Æthelflæd is described as "erased" and Austen "airbrushed" from history. The biography of Æthelflæd is largely unknown. Austen is better known, but in no danger of airbrushing. The iconic

Boudicca is wrenched from her history: she was a Celt, speaking a language something like Welsh, from what is now Norfolk, loved by the Iceni. Unfortunately, she had few military skills so would not be iconic for people in Wales or Norfolk. The Britannia icon seems to be a creation of Rome, depicting a goddess Minerva, copied from the Greek icon Athena, with symbolic weapons. The British empire then contrived to borrow this icon again and loosely identify Britannia with Boudicca.

Michael Wood made a film about the Macartney Embassy to China of 1793; he appears to agree with emperor Qianlong's dismissal of the gifts as "poor tribute". It was therefore startling to find out that Heshen, the most successful embezzler in Chinese history, had manipulated both his emperor and Macartney for personal gain. Heshen stole most of the Chinese state wealth for about 15 years. This meant lots of dykes collapsed and famine ensued. Qianlong had been impressed by Royal Navy warships, the brass cannon he asked to fire and the ductile steel of the ceremonial swords he was given. The stage was set for an alliance between the empires of China and Britain. The lack of "due diligence" about Heshen meant that the moment was lost. The working model steam engine never reached the emperor. A more alert government would have seen that imperial powers were about to overwhelm China, so Qianlong could have hastily tried to catch up by buying technology transfer, British steam power and steel making. Insistence on payment for tea in silver, which just went into Heshen's storeroom, meant that Britain switched to selling heroin and finding a rival source of tea in Assam. The failure to industrialise led to the carving up of China by imperial powers. Japan learned that to avoid China's fate it had to become an empire and have its own colonies. Michael uses the term "creative history" by contrast with "peer-reviewed history", which he explains is because he is mainly occupied with film making. This creativity may involve flattering the audience, rather than giving embarrassing information about embezzlers. Modern Chinese are not at all embarrassed about Heshen but they remain angry about the what they call the "century of humiliation" represented by Hong Kong.

As vehicles onto whom narcissistic needs can be projected, Mary, Boudicca, Britannia, Æthelflæd and Arthur do not depend on actual historical biographies. They are icons, created by the attributions of devotees in the here-and-now to satisfy psychological needs. We should not confuse icons with history.

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