Heaven & Earth
ART OF BYZANTIUM FROM GREEK COLLECTIONS

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Jacket / Cover illustration Icon with Archangel Michael (cat. no. 59) • Frontispiece: The Evangelist Matthew from the Four Gospels (cat. no. 83)
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In 1935 Getrude Stein visited her hometown of Oakland, California, but everything about the place had changed. She could not find her former house, the town reflected none of her memories, and she famously wrote that “there is no there there.” Her sense of place, history, and memory had been disrupted and effaced. A European traveler might have felt that a town incorporated in 1852 could not have had a deep sense of its own history to begin with, far less one built up over thousands of years in the presence of ancient and medieval monuments, and the relentless turnover of neighborhoods in American towns would have undermined incipient feelings of “thereness.”
In the western provinces of their empire especially, Roman planners did in fact design "Identikit" cities whose purpose was often to disrupt prior ethnic or political configurations and historical memories. Latin gradually replaced the local languages and native cults took on a Roman appearance and nomenclature. The eastern cities, by contrast, were already drenched in their own sense of the past, and this was the world in which most early Christians originated. The past was defined by mythical associations with founders, heroes, and oracles; by the memory of political history, recent and ancient; by monuments; and by hundreds if not thousands of statues of gods, heroes, artists, and notables. It was enhanced by literary references and sometimes recorded in works of history. The leaders of the new faith struggled to decide how much of this past could be absorbed into the Christian life, and under what terms. Was it to be understood as pagan and thus destroyed, or was it neutral (secular), in which case it could be ignored or even converted to Christian purposes? These boundaries were fluid, but the issue could not be ignored, as the past was everywhere present in the Greek cities.

The present chapter will present some fascinating ways in which the past—invariably a pagan past—was appropriated and Christianized in the Early Byzantine period (A.D. 330–641). Considerations of space prevent a systematic discussion, but we can present a range of different kinds of material, some of them undiscovered gems.

The new imperial capital, Constantinople, was itself a city without a past, especially after Constantine leveled the site of Byzantion and populated his new foundation with subjects from different provinces. Its own “thereness” was built up in part by borrowing—or stealing, some argued—that of more ancient places. Constantinople acquired huge collections of statues from Greece and Asia Minor that acquired new symbolic meanings, (see A. Cutler below, 166-73) thereby creating and defining the city’s past. The Baths of Zeuxippos contained a collection of more than eighty statues of heroes, poets, and gods with a prominent Trojan theme. These linked New Rome to the older Rome via their common ancestor, Ilium.2 In the Hippodrome stood a row of antiquities, each with its own associations, including the Serpent Column from Delphi (fig. 20). At first this signified perhaps the emperors’ intention to defeat Persia, thus appropriating Greek glories for the Christian emperor, but later it acquired magical functions, such as keeping snakes out of the city.3 A high official, Lausos, created a magnificent collection including Pheidias’ chryselephantine statue of Zeus from Olympia, an Athena from Lindos, and Praxiteles’ Aphrodite from Knidos (fig. 21).4 In their new context these pagan relics, including the Palladium of Troy said to have been moved by Constantine from Rome to his column in the forum, blended with the city’s increasingly Christian character to produce a rich symphony of historical associations. The symbolic map of Constantinople encoded the Byzantine appropriation of all pasts (heroic, Greek, Roman, and Christian), and made the city a true caput mundi.5

These museum collections made some Christians uncomfortable. Eusebios distorted their aim when he said that Constantine put these statues on display to ridicule the beliefs of the pagans.6 He viewed the past that they represented solely in religious and polemical terms, and some preferred to destroy such statues and the temples they stood in. Much depended on a theological point: If the gods were held to be mere human delusions, then there could be no harm in keeping sculpted stones around. But if they were demons who dwelt in statues and haunted the faithful, then they had to be smashed. Both views are found, and indeed there was much smashing and symbolic disfigurement, especially in Syria and Egypt. Crosses were carved to keep the demons out—or to seal them in (fig. 22 and cat. no. 6) But imperial officials often took a different approach, one that would have dramatic consequences: they redefined ancient statues as “art,” which should be preserved for its aesthetic rather than religious value (artis pretio quam divinitate),7 so long as there was no pagan worship.

The same approach was being applied by Christian thinkers to ancient texts such as those of Homer, in which the gods were omnipresent: whereas many pagans believed that Homer contained important...
truths about their gods, Christian scholars viewed his poems as literature to be consumed for aesthetic pleasure, or for their symbolic value. Odysses’ Sirens became symbols of the temptations the hero of the faith had to withstand (fig. 19). Our modern categories of “art” and “literature” were largely by-products of this effort by Christians to desanctify and sanitize the pagan past for their own use (for example, Byzantine plot summaries of the Iliad omit the gods, as do some modern film adaptations). But there were limits to imperial tolerance: when Justinian famously closed down the philosophical schools of Athens, he made it clear that the contents of Greek philosophy were still potentially subversive. As later emperors would affirm, it was best taught by Christians who could explain its errors to their students.

History was rewritten to make pagan literature more acceptable. It was said, for instance, that Achilles Tatius and Heliodoros, authors of two popular romance novels, later became bishops. This legitimized their erotically charged works for Christian audiences. One enterprising author went so far as to write a hagiographical romance, Galaction and Episteme, as a sequel to the two novels. Galaction he presents as the son of the protagonists of Tatius’ novel, Clerophon and Leucippe (though his parentage evokes Heliodoros’ protagonists as well).

It turns out that the couple were unhappy, and did not manage to conceive a child until they converted to Christianity; their son Galaction then converted his wife Episteme so that they could live in separate monasteries, and eventually they were both happily martyred (underDecius). This retroactively claimed the literary past for Christianity, while also suggesting that paganism was “sterile” and replacing conventional erotic values with those of ascetics and martyrs. The pagan past emerges as a necessary “prequel” that is transcended, not rejected.

Art and literature, however, have unintended consequences, and a power that cannot so easily be tamed. Soon after the creation of the Lausos collection, we hear of a painter whose hands withered when he made an icon of Christ modeled after Zeus (he was healed by the patriarch). Olympian Zeus may have projected an image of power that operated subconsciously. How were Christians to imagine the godhead of Christ anyway? No one knew. But there were ways to tame the past of the gods. In the sixth century John Malalas wrote a comedic chronicle that began with the Creation and extended up to his own day. He integrated the history of the Greek and Egyptian gods into his survey of the Old Testament by euhemerizing them, i.e. treating them as mortal kings who had established the first communities and taught basic arts for the benefit of mankind. This, of course, was an ancient theory, but Malalas’ framework was scriptural, and his approach mostly irreverent and “demythologizing” in a literal sense. His Zeus, for example, “had many sons and daughters by beautiful women. He had mystic knowledge and astonished the women, who regarded him as a god and were seduced by him since he showed them displays by mechanical means.”

Other appropriations of the past were theologically more ambiguous. In Athens, probably in the late fifth century, the

Fig. 21 | Aphrodite of Knidos, Roman marble copy of the ancient Greek original by Praxiteles (4th century B.C.) National Museum of Rome, Ludovici Collection (8619). Photo su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali-Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma.

Fig. 22 | Roman funerary stele. Andros Archaeological Museum no. 245 (1975/129).
Parthenon was converted into a church consecrated to the Virgin (fig. 23). This entailed very little change to the building. The pediment sculptures were retained throughout the Byzantine period, and there is almost no evidence of violent destruction of the city’s pagan sites. The city’s (belated) conversion presents an impression of quiet continuity. Sources from around A.D. 500 recount that when the temple was being converted, the Christians found the text of an oracle that had been delivered to Jason and the Argonauts about both the temple at Kyzikos and the Parthenon. When those temples were being built, the god Apollo was asked to whom they should be dedicated. He answered that it did not matter, as the temple would in time be rededicated to Mary. It is said that this oracle was placed to the left of the door of the Parthenon. An inscribed block with fifth-century lettering containing the text of the oracle was found on the island of Icaria. In this way, with mind-defying theology both the god and the ancient heroes were enlisted in support of the conversion. This oracle was, in fact, part of an extensive corpus of pseudo-pagan inscriptions that began to circulate circa 500 in support of Christianization (known today as the Tübingen Theosophy).

The Christian culture of the early Byzantine Empire did not establish itself by wiping out all traces of its predecessor. Destruction and loss there certainly were, but in myriad subtle ways Christian culture creatively established its own “thereness” amid the monuments, traditions, and literature of classical antiquity.

1 Stein 1937, 298.
2 Kaldellis 2007a.
3 Stichel 1997.
5 Dagron 1984.
6 Eusebios, Vita Constantini, 1975, 3. 54.
7 Cod. Theod. 1954, 16.10.8.
8 Kaldellis 2007b, 154–56.
9 Rubiano 2009.
11 Malalas 1986, 8 (= 1.10).
12 Kaldellis 2009, 47–53.
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