

Christianity and Ancient Art: Rupture or Dialogue? (2) (Ioanna Stoufi-Poulimenou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Typical of the ancient temples in this category (see part 1) is the case of the most important monument of Classical antiquity, the Parthenon[1]. Its conversion into a Christian church possibly should be placed at the end of the 5th century or more likely to the period of Justinian[2].

The ancient temple was converted into a three-apsed basilica with the alterations necessary for Christian worship: to the west, the entry of the *opisthonaos* (rear inner porch) was the main entrance to the Christian church and the *opisthonaos* itself became the narthex; on the eastern side, the apse of the sanctuary was added to the *pronaos* (front inner porch) while the two-storey Doric colonnade of the *sekos* (interior) were used to create the naves and the upper-storey of the Christian church; in order to give unimpeded access to the central nave, the central column of the transverse colonnade was removed; four windows were made on the long walls to provide lighting; to achieve this, three slabs were removed from the frieze and at those points the part of the *tranos* (crown moulding) above were cut away, the column spaces of the *peristasis* (four-sided porch) were blocked off with walls, so that the open wing of the ancient temple became a kind of perimeter hall for the Christian church. The conversion of the Parthenon into a Christian church was certainly positive and by then, after the abolition of the ancient religion, the only factor which ensured its survival until the great disaster of 1687, caused by the bombardment of the Venetians under Morozini[3].

It is worthy of note that a large part of the statuary of the Parthenon, with clearly pagan subject matter, remained and decorated the Christian Parthenon. To be precise: the Ionic frieze with the Panathenaea procession, a large portion of the eastern pediment above the apse of the sanctuary, with the birth of Athena as its subject, the western pediment above the entrance of the temple, with the strife between Athena and Poseidon and the Doric frieze on the metopes with depictions of the Battle of the Giants, the Battle of the Amazons, the Trojan War and the



There is an old view, which is still being repeated today[4], that the extensive hacking away of the relief sculpture of part of the metopes of the east, west and north sides, as well as the removal of sculptures from the east pediment of the Parthenon was undertaken by Christians in a systematic and violent manner, because of their pagan content[5]. The fact that one metope (no. XXXII) on the north side and all the metopes on the south side were left untouched has left students of the monument somewhat at a loss and has been interpreted as a “misinterpretation”, that is that a new (Christian) content was attributed to them[6]. In particular, it was claimed by Rodenwaldt that metope XXXII was left undisturbed because the whole sculptural composition easily fitted into a Christian interpretation of the subject, and, more particularly, to the depiction of the scene of the Annunciation[7].

But however attractive this view might sound, any generalization of it would be supported by rather weak arguments and would founder on important questions: why were the metopes on the south side not torn down, given their equally pagan subject matter? Prachniker’s argument[8] that the south side of the Parthenon was invisible to the faithful after the ancient temple had been converted into a church has not been found convincing[9]. Did these also acquire a Christian “interpretation”? And why was this not the case with any other metope on the north, east and west sides? Why was the rest of the pagan statuary on the two pediments and the Ionic frieze which also ran round the Christian church left

untouched, without even a cross being inscribed for purification, as was common?[10]. The reasons why these portions of the temple were left intact remain inexplicable and all that can be offered at the moment are hypothetical solutions[11].

Even if we suppose that the hewing away or removal of certain parts of the statuary of the Parthenon occurred after its conversion into a Christian church, it cannot be linked to any destructive rage of Christians towards the works of art belonging to the ancient religion, because they would have destroyed all the statuary, since all the subjects were pagan in content. As Delivorrias has convincingly shown, the truncation of ancient statues which is quite frequently observed, together with the inscription of a cross for purification, must be linked, not to any desire on the part of Christians to destroy them, but to that fact that they were later needed for construction purposes or some other use. Had they been interested in destroying them, they would not have purified them. Once a cross had been inscribed, the statues could acquire a useful or even sacred character[12]. Hence, without proper evidence, even the supposed time, reasons and conditions under which the partial removal of the Parthenon's statuary occurred must remain a mystery[13].

It would be possible to make similar observations for other ancient temples in Athens which were converted into churches towards the end of the 6th century or in the 7th, such as the Erechtheum[14] and the temple of Hephaestus, known as the Theseum[15]. In these monuments, all the statuary was preserved and, as Christian churches, they exhibited hardly any differences from their former appearance. So the classical form was inducted in its entirety into ecclesiastical architecture not as imitation, i.e. as Classicism, as was the case centuries later with the Western Renaissance, or Neo-Classicism, but as a living feature, incorporated into a tradition with a continuum.

It is our view that the preservation of the statuary and, in general the classical form in the Christian Parthenon and other ancient temples which were converted into churches occurred for aesthetic reasons. The Christians preserved them as important works of art.

It is well known that the basic principles of ancient aesthetics were entirely accepted by the great Fathers of the Church of the 4th and 5th centuries, in particular the Cappadocians[16]. Basil the Great entirely adopted the Classical view that aesthetic beauty resided in the symmetry and harmony of the parts of a whole, which the appropriate addition of colour[17]. The same criteria were repeated by other Fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa[18] and Saint Gregory the

Theologian[19].

[1] On the history, the architecture and the statuary of the Parthenon, see, in general, A. Michaelis, *Der Parthenon*, Leipzig 1870-1871; M. Andronikos, «Κλασσική Τέχνη», *ΙΕΕ Γ²*, Ekdotiki Athinon Αθηνών, Athens 1972, pp. 280-283, 297-305, and especially the collective tome *Ο Παρθενώνας και η ακτινοβολία του στα νεώτερα χρόνια*, Melissa, Athens 1994 (hereafter *Παρθενώνας*), where there is also an earlier bibliography on the architecture and statuary. On the conversion of the monument into a Christian church and the alterations and additions that were made to it, see M. Korres, «Ο Παρθενώνας από την αρχαία εποχή μέχρι τον 19^ο αιώνα», *Παρθενώνας*, pp. 146 ff.; Poulimenos, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-56, A. Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon. Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens*, Cambridge University, New York 2009, p. 23 ff.

[2] Gioles, *Η Αθήνα*, p. 56.

[3] Korres, *op. cit.*, pp. 147, 155. It ought to be noted that great damage had already been done to the Parthenon in the 3rd century A.D. and this was attributed, in the majority view, to the attack of the Heroules (267).

[4] See Korres, *op. cit.*, p. 147; Ch. Bouras, "The Restitution Works on the Acropolis Monuments", C. Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, London-New York, p. 111.

[5] C. Prachniker, *Parthenonstudien*, Augsburg/Wien 1928, p. 48 ff. Having rejected Michaelis' position that there is no proof of systematic destruction of the Parthenon, particularly by Christians, and that the hewing away might be due to the Turks, at the time when the Parthenon became a mosque, adopts the position (which is no more than a hypothesis) that such a systematic and brutal destruction of the sculptures can be justified only at the time when significant works were taking place in the monument, that is at the time when it was converted to a Christian temple. He considers it improbable that the damage occurred under the Turks (1458), because of the minor changes which took place during the conversion of the monument into a mosque.

[6] C. Prachniker, *Parthenonstudien*, *op. cit.*; G. Rodenwaldt, «Interpretatio Christiana», *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 48 (1933), pp. 401-5; Korres, *op. cit.*, p.147, Delivorrias, *Interpretatio*, p. 120, *idem*, «Ο γλυπτός διάκοσμος του Παρθενώνα. Μορφή και περιεχόμενο», *Παρθενώνας*, p. 119.

[7] Rodenwaldt, *op. cit.* Delivorrias, *Interpretatio*, p.

[8] Op. cit.

[9] Rodenwaldt, op. cit; Delivorrias, *Interpretatio*, p. 120.

[10] On this, see Delivorrias, *Interpretatio*, p. 107 ff. On the inscription of a cross for the purification of ancient temples, see also Gregory of Nyssa, *Εἰς τὸν βίον τοῦ Ἁγίου Γρηγορίου τοῦ Θαυματουργοῦ*, PG 46, 913D-916B.

[11] Delivorrias, *Interpretatio*, p. 120; idem *Παρθενώνας*; Poulimenos, op. cit., pp. 53-6.

[12] Delivorrias, *Interpretatio*, p. 117 ff.

[13] Caution regarding the timing and cause of the removal, as well as a reluctance to accept the oft-repeated theory of the destruction of the statues by early Christians (partial destruction has also been attributed to the fire in the 3rd century and to the Latin occupiers of Athens after 1204) has been expressed in the recent international bibliography, such as M. Beard, *The Parthenon*, Harvard University Press 2002, p. 57; I. D. Jenkins, *The Parthenon Sculptures*, Harvard University 2007, p. 23; Kaldellis, op. cit., p. 42.

[14] On the Christian Erechtheum, see J.M. Paton, *The Erechtheum*, Cambridge, Mass.; G. Sotiriou, *EMME A'*, p. 43; idem, *Αἱ παλαιοχριστιανικαὶ βασιλικάι τῆς Ελλάδος*, AE1929, pp. 168-72; Korres, op. cit., p.150; I. Stoufi-Poulimenou, *Τὸ φράγμα τοῦ Ἱεροῦ Βήματος στους παλαιοχριστιανικοὺς ναοὺς τῆς Ελλάδος*, Athens 1999, p. 168, Poulimenos, op. cit., pp. 61-6.

[15] On the Christian Theseum, see Orlandos, «Εργασίαι ἀναστηλώσεως βυζαντινῶν μνημείων», *ABME B'* (1936), pp. 203-16; W. Dinsmoor, "Observations on the Hephaisteion", *Hesperia: Supplement V*, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1941, pp. 6-15; I Travlos, «Ἡ παλαιοχριστιανικὴ βασιλικὴ τοῦ Διονυσιακοῦ θεάτρου», *AE 1953-1954*, pp. 310 καὶ 316; Stoufi-Poulimenou, op. cit.; Poulimenos, op. cit., 56-61.

[16] See E. Theodorou, «Ἡ αἰσθητικὴ τῶν Τριῶν Ἱεραρχῶν», *Εφημέριος* 20 (1971), pp. 54-7, 94-6, 142-4, 206-8, 271-3, 309-12; I. Stoufi-Poulimenou, «Αἰσθητικὲς ἀντιλήψεις τῶν Καππαδοκῶν Πατέρων (Μ. Βασίλειος, Γρηγόριος ὁ Θεολόγος, Γρηγόριος ὁ Νύσσης)», *ΙΓ' Συμπόσιο Βυζαντινῆς καὶ Μεταβυζαντινῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας καὶ Τέχνης*, Athens 1993, *Πρόγραμμα καὶ περιλήψεις ἀνακοινώσεων*, p. 57; idem, «Ἀπὸ τὸ αἰσθητὸ στὸ νοητὸ κάλλος (Μια προσέγγιση στὴν αἰσθητικὴ τοῦ Γρηγορίου Νύσσης)», *ΙΓ' Διεθνὲς Συνέδριο Πατερικῆς Θεολογίας*, Athens 27-29 Sept. 1994; idem, «Οἱ περὶ τέχνης καὶ κάλλους ἀντιλήψεις τοῦ Μεγάλου Βασιλείου

και η αισθητική της βυζαντινής τέχνης», *ΕΕΘΣΠΑ*, ΛΗ΄ (2003), pp. 547 ff.; D. Angelis, *Αισθητική Βυζαντινή. Η έννοια του κάλλους στον Μέγα Βασίλειο*, Athens 2004 (passim).

[17] *Εις την Εξαήμερον* III, 10, PG 29, 76D-77A (“A hand, an eye, or any portion of a statue lying apart from the rest, would look beautiful to no one. But if each is restored to its own place, the beauty of proportion, until now almost unperceived, would strike even the most uncultivated”); *Ερμηνεία εις Ησαΐαν* 5, 173, PG 30, 409A.

[18] *Περί ψυχής και Αναστάσεως λόγος*, PG 45, 197D.

[19] *Λόγος ΛΗ΄, Εις τα Θεοφάνια, ήγουν Γενέθλια του Σωτήρος*, PG 36, 321B.