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Christianity and Ancient Art: Rupture or Dialogue? [3] (Ioanna Stoufi-Poulimenou)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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At the same time, we know from the sources that both the state and the Church recognized the aesthetic value of the monuments of the ancient religion. Thus, for example, in an edict of the emperors Gratian, Valentinian and Theodosius, in 382, there is mention of a pagan temple in Mesopotamia, which was to remain open so that people could enjoy the aesthetics of the statues which were on display.

In an edict of 399, Arcadius and Theodosius ordered that the decorations of public buildings be preserved, while another, by the same emperors, forbade any destruction of temples which were devoid of idols and, even if there were any idols there, no destruction of them was permitted unless sacrifices were still being carried out[1]. Canon 58 of the Council of Carthage (401) urged the emperors to order the destruction of the idols in Africa. The ancient temples had also to be destroyed, but only if they were bereft of decoration[2]. Moreover, an edict from the year 365, which was published by emperors Valentinian and Valens indicates that in certain cases, Christians were actively involved in saving ancient temples[3].

Another indication of the recognition of the aesthetic value of ancient works of art is the transfer, by Constantine I, of statues from Athens and other cities in the empire to Constantinople in order to adorn squares and other public and private places[4]. According to Eusebius: “The whole city named after the emperor was filled with bronze statues of exquisite workmanship, dedicated in every nation”[5]. Statues were also brought to the capital in the reigns of Constantius II, Valentinian and Theodosius II. Many of these were authentically Attic or Hellenistic. Among them was the gold and ivory stature of Zeus from Olympia, most likely transported at the time of Theodosius II, after the prohibition of the Olympic Games in 394. Some time between 465 and 470, in all probability, the bronze statue of Athena Promachus was taken to Constantinople and erected in front of the renovated senate building in the Forum of Constantine[6]. And even in the 6th century, Justinian ordered General Narsis to destroy ancient temples in Egypt and to send the statues to Constantinople[7].

In a well-known article, Cyril Mango, who examined the attitude of the Byzantines to ancient statues, expressed his astonishment at the large numbers of them which adorned the capital. He interpreted the phenomenon as the result of a firm religious policy on the part of the first Byzantine emperors, claiming that the statues even had a religious character. It is beyond question, however, that this tactic demonstrates acceptance of the aesthetic value of ancient sculpture, and the statues which adorned public places became objects of attention and admiration for the population of the capital as a whole, even the ordinary populace[8]. This

would certainly have involved a popular familiarity and enduring contact with ancient art.

It is therefore obvious that, in the first Christian centuries, and even later, Byzantines lived alongside works of antiquity, of which the fundamental aesthetic principles were also accepted by the Fathers of the Church. They often remained in churches which had been ancient sanctuaries and retained their pagan decoration and it was possible for the statues to be admired in the squares of the major cities, especially Constantinople, while scholars and artists studied and copied the illuminated manuscripts of antiquity. This is why a relationship of dialogue with the ancient tradition continued in Byzantium, which often influenced Byzantine art in creative and innovative ways.

The effect of ancient artistic practices can also be seen in Early Christian sculpture. Elements of classical morphology was adopted into Christian architectural features, such as, for example, in a parapet from the basilica which was built in the Asclepeion in Athens[9], in the epistyle of the Christian Parthenon[10], and in a cover from the ancient Roman market in Athens, which are on display in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens[11].

In Byzantine church building, sketches have been found in which harmonious proportions are observed, which indicates the continuation of a high quality of architectural and constructional knowledge[12]. In certain Byzantine churches, it has been shown that that their façades demonstrate a harmonious ratio similar to that of the “golden section”[13]. In Athens, the Church of the Mother of God “Swift to Hear” (the Small Metropolis) is decorated on the inside, in the form of a frieze, with a large number of reliefs, many of which come from ancient monuments of the city, some “purified” by the inscription of a cross[14].

The basic principles of ancient Greek painting, such as the domination of the human form in compositions and the role of line, also characterized Byzantine painting. It was typical for the Byzantines to talk about their art in terms and with criteria which were in common usage in ancient art. While we know that Byzantine art is not naturalistic, the Byzantines themselves did not at all see it allegorically or symbolically, in the way it is sometimes interpreted today, but as “naturalistic” in the extreme, in the sense that it depicts its subjects vividly and vibrantly, and in a manner which continues the artistic tradition of Pheidias, Appelles and Zeuxis[15]. Thus Saint Fotios, in his 17th homily, which was given in 867 in the Church of Holy Wisdom (Ayia Sofia), most likely at the unveiling of the mosaic representation of the Mother of God Holding the Child in the apse, remarks that: “the painter’s art has thus accurately copied nature”[16]. Emperor Leo VI, commenting on the

mosaic depiction of Christ in the dome of the main church of the Monastery of Kavleas (891-901), at the opening ceremony for the church, says that it does not seem like a work of art, but rather as if Christ Himself had stopped in order to teach and that the silence had spread to His lips[17]. Nikiforos Khoumnos, a scholar at the court of Andronikos II Palaiologos, urged the writers of his day to have those of antiquity as their models, just as painters looked to Lysippos and Apelles and anyone else who could render "vivid paintings not devoid of breath and movement"[18].

There are figures in Byzantine iconography, such as the angel in the marvellous icon of the Annunciation in the Monastery of Sinai[19], John in the Crucifixion in the Monastery of Dafnio[20] and the Virgins in the Entry of the Mother of God in the Protaton, a work by Pansellinos[21], which recall ancient Classical and Hellenistic works.

And so the Byzantines, particularly after the "Byzantine Renaissances" which certainly have no connection with that in the West, proved themselves to be the real bearers of Ancient Greek tradition, not so much in terms of forms and the imitation of models, but on the level of basic principles and spirit. Years ago, the late Panayiotis Mikhelis wrote: "The Romans first and then the Renaissance and the Neo-Classicists misunderstood the spirit of Greek art. The Byzantines, on the other hand, were its direct heirs"[22].

[1] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., p. 51.

[2] Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα των θείων και ιερών Κανόνων*, Athens 1853, p. 462: " and they shall command their temples which are in the fields and concealed places, without any embellishment, to be destroyed".

[3] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., p. 52.

[4] See C. Mango, "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder", *DOP* 17 (1963), pp. 55-75; D. Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, London 1963, p. 73; Saradi-Mendelovici, op. cit., pp. 50-1.

[5] *Vita Constantini*, III, 54, PG 20, 1117B.

[6] Gioles, *Η Αθήνα,* pp. 33-4.

[7] Procopius, *Υπέρ των πολέμων*, I, 19. 37, J. Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia,* I, Lipsiae MCMV, p. 106.

[8] "...whereas the common folk of Byzantium did not read Homer and Pindar, everyone – the butcher, the candlemaker, and the lower-class saint – could and did look at the statues", Mango, op. cit., p. 55 ff.

[9] I. Travlos, «Η παλαιοχριστιανική βασιλική του Ασκληπιείου Αθηνών», *AE* 1939-1941, pp. 50-1, figs. 12 and 14.

[10] This was the rounded epistyle which probably decorated the interior of the apse of the sanctuary of the Christian Parthenon. See M. Sklavou-Mavroeidi, *Γλυπτά του Βυζαντινού Μουσείου Αθηνών,* Athens 1999, p. 42, no. 34. It is typical that the subject that was adopted for the sculptural decoration of the church had very obvious features of ancient art.

[11] Sklavou-Mavroeidi, op. cit., p. 53, no. 56.

[12] See N. Moutsopoulos, «Harmonische Bauschnitte in der Kirchen vom Typ Kreuzförmigen Innenbaus in Griechischen Kernland», *BZ* 55(1962), 274-291; idem, *Εκκλησίες της Καστοριάς, 9ος-11ος αιώνας*, Thessaloniki 1992, pp. 476-81. On the use of mathematical ratios and of geometry in Byzantine architecture and art, see also, Mathew, *Aesthetics*, 23-37; V. Korać, «La Géométrie des architectes byzantins», *ΔΧΑΕ* Κ΄ (1998-1999), pp. 99-104.

[13] G. Poulimenos, «Παρατηρήσεις στις όψεις των βυζαντινών ναών των Αθηνών», *Δέκατο Πέμπτο Συμπόσιο Βυζαντινής και Μεταβυζαντινής Αρχαιολογίας και Τέχνης, ΧΑΕ, Πρόγραμμα και περιλήψεις εισηγήσεων και ανακοινώσεων*, Athens 1995, p. 68; idem, "Harmonious sketches outside Byzantine churches in Greece", *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21-26 August 2006,Volume III, Abstracts of Communications*, pp. 316-7.

[14] The intensely Classical shape and decoration of the building has been linked to the period when the scholar Mikhaïl Khoniatis (Michael Choniates) was Metropolitan of Athens (appointed in 1182 [?]). He was the last Orthodox Metropolitan of Athens and left the city at the start of Frankish rule in 1204, so as to avoid declaring allegiance to the Church of Rome.

[15] Mango, op. cit., 65.

[16] V. Laourdas, *Φωτίου Ομιλίαι. Έκδοση κειμένου, εισαγωγή και σχόλια*, Thessaloniki 1959 [*Ελληνικά,* Παράρτημα αρ. 12], pp. 164-72.

[17] *Λέοντος του Σοφού πανυγηρικοί (sic) λόγοι*, published by the Hieromonk Akakios, Athens 1868, p. 245.

[18] Nikiforos Khoumnos, *Περί λόγων κρίσεως*...., I. Boissonade, Anecdota graeca, III, Paris 1831, p. 357:

[19] *Σινά. Οι θησαυροί της Μονής,* Εκδοτική Αθηνών, Athens 1990, p.160, fig. 29.

[20] N. Hatzidakis, *Βυζαντινά ψηφιδωτά* [*Ελληνική Τέχνη*], Εκδοτική Αθηνών, Athens 1994, p. 133, fig. 116 and p. 135, fig. 118.

[21] M. Akheimastou-Potamianou, *Βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες*, [*Ελληνική Τέχνη*], Εκδοτική Αθηνών, Athens 1994, pp. 128-9, figs.105 and 106.

[22] P. Mikhelis, *Αισθητική θεώρηση της Βυζαντινής Τέχνης*, Athens 1946, p. 18.