

Christianity and Ancient Art: Rupture or Dialogue? [1] (Ioanna Stoufi-Poulimenou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



When, in the fifth century, the space in Hadrian's Library in Athens was divided equally between pagans and Christians, the relations between what appeared to be the two flourishing communities in the city were defined both in practice and symbolically. The renovated wings were given to the pagan Sophists and the courtyard to the Christians to build an important church, the well-known Christian tetraconch (fig.1)[1]. The church was probably the first metropolitan church in Athens, later called "The Great Panayía (Mother of God)[2]. An act certainly of political diplomacy, directed and funded either by the eparch of Illyricum, Herculus (408-12), or by the native Athenian empress Evdokia[3], doubtless led to everyday co-existence and symbiosis for the two groups on a site of the greatest importance for both: a place of worship for the Christians and also a place for the practice of pagan philosophy.

Concerning the physical co-existence and interaction between these two religious groups in the Early Christian centuries, there is a rich contemporary bibliography[4]. At the same time, we know that, until the reign of Constantine the

Great, relations between Christians and pagans were not always harmonious and that, from time to time, harsh persecutions were ordered by Roman emperors against Christians, as a result of which we have a host of martyrs. It is also well-known that the destruction of many ancient monuments was the result of the acts of



Within the context of these relations between pagans and Christians, the question may be posed: what was the relationship between Christians and the monuments of the ancient religion and the art which these represented. We shall attempt to approach the issue from two sides: 1) What was the Christian attitude to the ancient monuments and their preservation? and 2) what influences did Early Christian and, later, Byzantine art receive from ancient art and of what quality were they? The subject is, of course, enormous, and has been more or less thoroughly researched in a variety of ways, so within the framework of the present paper only a fragmented and illustrative treatment is feasible.

As regards the first aspect of the subject, the fate of classical monuments in later antiquity has been linked by many scholars to the clashes between pagans and Christians, in the context of the Christianization of the Roman empire, while the disappearance of many of these monuments has been attributed to their demolition by fanatical bishops, monks or the common rabble. Although isolated incidents of violence on the part of representatives of state authority and Christian groups should certainly not be disregarded, modern scholarship now accepts that there was no systematic destruction of ancient monuments, either as the result of

the policy of the Byzantine emperors or because of the theology and decisions of the Universal Church[5]. At the same time, scholarship has long since discarded the ossified view that the spread of Christianity and the new aesthetic concepts it brought were responsible for the end of the ancient world and therefore of ancient art[6].

The conclusions of this research might be summarized as follows:

1) The most numerous and significant of the attacks on ancient monuments, either on the part of the political authorities or by members of the Church are not linked to the triumph of the Church at the beginning of the 4th century[7], as might have been expected but mainly occurred after the edicts of Theodosius I at the end of the century. Of course, legislation against the pagan religion began with Constantine the Great[8]. Imperial steps were taken which included the closure of ancient temples, the confiscation of their property and the prohibition on the celebration of sacrifices and the worship of idols. The actual destruction of temples was not included in the first edicts[9]. Quite a number of ancient temples must not have been able to function because there simply were not enough adherents to maintain them. Gradually they would also lose their basic financial sources of supply: contributions from believers and funding from the state, making their upkeep impossible and their abandonment inevitable. Their property passed to the public authorities, in accordance with Roman law. Moreover, edicts by Constantius and Constans (341 and 346) regarding the closure of temples of pagan religion were applied in the Christian East, but not in the West or in Athens[10]. But with the edicts of Theodosius (380-392), which established Christianity as the only acceptable religion in the empire, public or private pagan worship was banned and the sanctuaries were abandoned[11]. Imperial edicts from the years 398 and 399 envisaged the demolition of ancient sanctuaries, without any disturbance of public order, and the use of the materials from them in other constructions. Another edict, in 407, ordered the demolition of idols and the transfer of sanctuaries to public use[12]. Finally, the edicts of Theodosius II envisaged the suspension of the operations of ancient temples and their purification. The sanctuaries were sealed and some were transformed into Christian churches.

The appeal by the Athenian pagan orator Libanius to Theodosius for the preservation of the ancient sanctuaries in his essay "In favour of the sanctuaries", with is basically an argument that they should be conserved as works of art "demonstrates the general conviction that the ancient religion was now a matter for museums in the Roman world"[13].

2) The attitude of the state towards the monuments of the ancient religion were

the result, on the one hand of the imperial religious policy and, on the other, of the cultural and social conditions of the age. At the same time, the implementation of imperial edicts largely depended on the interpretation and personality of each local governor, while a variety of local cultural forces produced conflicting attitudes towards the ancient monuments[14]. Significant demolitions of ancient monuments began with the Praetorian Eparch of the East, Maternus Cynegius (384-8) who enforced the imperial edicts with particular fanaticism and brutality. He brought about the demolition of ancient temples and statues, as well as the murder of pagans in the East and Egypt[15]. His actions have been interpreted within the context of political realism (a law of May 385)[16]. Other examples are the destruction of the temples of Gaza by another imperial office-holder, and of the Serapeium in Alexandria, which occurred in 391, after clashes between Christians and pagans[17]. In general, however, the imperial edicts were applied with moderation.

3) The attitude of the Church was similar. There was never a decision by an Ecumenical Synod to destroy ancient sanctuaries. And when, on occasion, certain representatives of the Church, such as local bishops, ordinary believers or monastic zealots, took part in the destruction of monuments, particularly in the East and in Egypt, it appears that they were encouraged by imperial measures[18]. Well-known instances are those involving Bishop Marcellus in Apameia (391 or 392) and Patriarch Theofilos of Alexandria (345-412)[19].

The sources indicate that gradually, by the mid-5th century, most sanctuaries had collapsed, not by being attacked by Christians, but because of being abandoned and because it was impossible to maintain them, since they no longer enjoyed funding from the public purse nor contributions from adherents of the ancient religion[20]. A typical description is that of the temple of Mithras in Alexandria, which the historian Socrates tells us was “from days of old abandoned and uncared for” and which Emperor Constantius gave to the Church of Alexandria to use “as a school”[21]. Also typical is the fact that when the Neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus visited Athens before 432 A.D. and went up to the Acropolis, he found the Parthenon and the other sanctuaries had been closed a good number of years before they were sealed by Theodosius II[22]. In any case, it appears that, until at least 410, worship continued, because the Sophist Apronianus erected a statue of Herculus, the eparch of Illyricum, next to that of the Promachus (Athena), honouring him as the *promachus* (defender) of the *institutions*[23]. At the end of the 5th/beginning of the 6th centuries, after a long period of abandonment, the process of purifying and converting the sanctuaries in Athens into Christian churches began. In a few instances, where such conversion was not worth the effort, new Christian churches were built in their places[24]

The following abbreviations are used in the article:

ABME = *Αρχαίον Βυζαντινών Μνημείων Ελλάδος*

AE = *Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς*

AJP = *American Journal of Philology*

BZ = *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*

DOP = *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*

ΔΧΑΕ = *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*

ΕΕΒΣ = *Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών*

ΕΕΘΣΠΑ = *Επιστημονική Επετηρίς Θεολογικής Σχολής Πανεπιστημίου Αθηνών*

ΕΜΜΕ = *Ευρετήριο Μεσαιωνικών Μνημείων Ελλάδος*

ΙΕΕ = *Ιστορία Ελληνικού Έθνους*

JTS = *Journal of Theological Studies*

ΠΑΕ = *Πρακτικά Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*

PG = *Patrologia cursus completes, Series graeca*

RAC = *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*

ΧΑΕ = *Χριστιανική Αρχαιολογική Εταιρεία*

[1] On the tetraconch Christian church in Hadrian's Library, see G. Sotiriou, *Αι παλαιοχριστιανικά βασιλικά της Ελλάδος*, *ΑΕ* 1929, 173-174; I Travlos, «Ανασκαφαί εν τη Βιβλιοθήκη του Αδριανού », *ΠΑΕ* 1950, pp. 41-63; idem, *Πολοδομική εξέλιξις των Αθηνών*, Αθήνα 1993² (1st ed. Athens 1960), pp. 139 ff. 89, and 90; idem, «Το τετράκογχο οικοδόμημα της Βιβλιοθήκης του Αδριανού», *Φίλια έπη εις Γεώργιον Ε. Μυλωνάν*, Athens 1986, [Βιβλιοθήκη της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας, αριθμ. 103], Α΄, Athens 1986, 343-7; D. De Bernardi Ferrero, «L' edificio nell' interno della cosiddeta biblioteca di Adriano ad Atene», *Corsi di Cultura sull' Arte Ravennate e Bizantina* 22 (1975), pp. 171- 88; D. Pallas, «Το τετράκογχο της Βιβλιοθήκης του Αδριανού», *ΕΕΒΣ* 47 (1987/89); idem, «Η Αθήνα στα χρόνια της μετάβασης από την αρχαία λατρεία στη χριστιανική. Τα αρχαιολογικά δεδομένα», *ΕΕΘΣΠΑ*, ΚΗ΄(1989), 867-870; P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, *Σύνταγμα των παλαιοχριστιανικών ψηφιδωτών της Ελλάδος: II, Πελοπόννησος - Στερεά Ελλάδα*,

Θεσσαλονίκη 1987, 138, no. 75; A. Karivieri, "The So-Called Library of Hadrian and the Tetraconch Church in Athens", in P. Kastrén (ed.), *Post-Herulian Athens*, Helsinki 1994, 89 ff.; N. Gioles, *Παλαιοχριστιανική τέχνη. Ναοδομία (π. 200-600)*, Athens 1998, p. 105; idem, *Η Αθήνα στους πρώτους χριστιανικούς αιώνες. Πολεοδομική εξέλιξη*, Athens 2005, pp. 40 ff.; G. Poulimenos, *Από τον χριστιανικό Παρθενώνα στον Λύσανδρο Καυταντζόγλου*, Athens 2006, pp. 22-30.

[2] Travlos, *Πολεοδομική εξέλιξις*, p. 139. The name "Great Panayía was given to the small single-room church with a cupola, dating from the 12th century, which occupied the Eastern portion of the destroyed Early Christian church, the previous "Great Panayía". See Pallas, op. cit., p. 870, note 82.

[3] According to one view, the Christian tetraconch was part of the more general renovations and new distribution of the rooms of the Library by Eparch Herculus of Illyricum (408-412), so as to serve both the pagan education of the Sophists, the main defenders of the ancient religion, as well as the liturgical requirements of the Christians. This position is reinforced by the erection of a statue of Herculus at the entry of the Library by the Neo-Platonist Sophist Plutarch (of Athens), certainly as an expression of gratitude for the eparch's beneficence towards them. Besides, the architectural similarity between the tetraconch in Athens and other tetraconchs in the region of Lychnidos, one on the site of today's Ochrid and another at Lin, in an area which belonged administratively to the jurisdiction of the eparch of Illyricum, leads to the supposition that these tetraconches were part of a comprehensive state religious policy and were probably funded by the state. On this, see Pallas, op. cit., pp. 868-70. Another view is that it is likely that the construction of the church was funded by Athenais, the daughter of the Sophist Leontios, who married Emperor Theodosios II (408-50) in 421 and changed her name to Evdokia on baptism. See Gioles, *Η Αθήνα*, 43, where there are arguments in favour of this position and a bibliography.

[4] Modern research has paid special attention to the co-existence and mutual influences between Christians and pagans, despite the antitheses and conflicts between them. See H. Saradi-Mendelovici, "Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries", *DOP* 44 (1990), p. 48, note 8, where there is the relevant bibliography.

[5] See Saradi - Mendelovici, op. cit., pp. 47 and 49, notes 20 and 21, where there is a bibliography, and Poulimenos, op. cit., 20 ff.

[6] See A. Delivorrias, «Interpretatio Christiana. Γύρω από τα όρια του παγανιστικού και του χριστιανικού κόσμου», *Ευφρόσυνον. Αφιέρωμα στον Μανόλη Χατζηδάκη*

, 1, Athens 1991, p. 114, note 37, where there is also an up-to-date bibliography. On matters of art and the rupture with the ancient Classical and Hellenistic form which already existed in the pagan world, see the studies by: R. Bianci Bandinelli, *Rome. La fin de l'art antique*, Gallimard, Paris 1970; G. Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, London 1963, 12 ff.; E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making, Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd-7th Century*, Harvard University Press, 1977; N. Panselinos, *Βυζαντινή Ζωγραφική*, Athens 2000, p. 35 ff.

[7] On the attitude of the early Christians towards ancient monuments, see T. C. G. Thornton, "The Destruction of Idols – Sinful or Meritorious?", *JTS*, n.s. 37 (1986), pp.121-4; F. W. Deichmann, «Christianisierung II (der Monumente)», *RAC* 2 (1954), vv. 1228-41.

[8] T. D. Barnes, "Constantine's Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice", *AJP* 105 (1984), pp. 69-72.

[9] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., p. 48.

[10] V. Stefanidis, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία*, Athens 1948, pp. 132-3; See Feidas, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία*, Α', Athens 2002, p. 337; Poulimenos, op. cit., p. 19.

[11] Stefanidis, op. cit., pp. 134-5.

[12] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., p. 49.

[13] Poulimenos, op. cit., p. 21.

[14] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., 47-48.

[15] R. Mac Mullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A. D. 100-400)*, New Harven-London 1984, 98, G. Fowden, "Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire, A.D. 320-435", *JTS* 29. I (1978), 62-64, Stefanidis, op. cit.

[16] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., note 2.

[17] Ibid, p. 49, note 17, where there is also a bibliography.

[18] Fowden, op. cit., particularly pp. 55, 77.

[19] Fowden, op. cit., 64; Mac Mullen, op. cit., 98-99; A. Favale, *Teofilo d' Alessandria (345-c.412): Scritti, vita e dottrina*, Turin 1958.

[20] Saradi- Mendelovici, op. cit., p. 49, Poulimenos, op. cit., p. 21-2.

[21] *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία*, III. 2.

[22] See also Kaldellis, op. cit., pp. 33-34, where there is a comment on the relevant passage from the biography of Proclus.

[23] Gioles, *Η Αθήνα*, p. 34.

[24] A typical example is the basilica which was built on the site of the Asclepeion on the southern slopes of the Acropolis in Athens. The greater part of this ancient temple was demolished because the layout could not easily be adapted to Christian worship. On the basilica of the Asclepeion, see A. Xyngoropoulos, «Χριστιανικόν Ασκληπιείον», *ΑΕ* 1915, p. 52 ff; I. Travlos, «Η παλαιοχριστιανική βασιλική του Ασκληπιείου Αθηνών», *ΑΕ* 1939-1941, p. 35 ff.