

Introduction

Byzantine Athens: a city with no history?

The last history to be written of Byzantine and medieval Athens was Ferdinand Gregorovius' 1889 *Geschichte der Stadt Athen im Mittelalter*.¹ Gregorovius' analysis was not deep, nor was his familiarity with Byzantium. He devoted more space to the shorter period of western colonial rule (AD 1205–1456) than to the far longer Byzantine period. Lacking many of the sources that we have today, Gregorovius filled pages with background political narrative that intersected with Athenian history only at specific moments.

Many textual and archaeological sources of information about Byzantine Athens have since come to light, as the reader of this book will realize. Yet there has concurrently been a regression in the prospects for a new history to replace that of Gregorovius. Few of those sources have been utilized in a spate of recent surveys of Athens and the Parthenon, which offer detailed coverage of antiquity and then jump to the first western travelers and the modern nation-state while devoting only a few pages to Byzantium. In part this is because these sources are written in difficult Greek and have not been studied by professional Byzantinists, who have too much material to wade through in proportion to their numbers and whose focus has traditionally been on Constantinople. Still, had this material been collected, it would have been impossible for a scholar of ancient art to assert that “almost nothing is known of the history of the Parthenon during the ‘Dark Ages,’ which were nowhere darker than at Athens.”² To the contrary, far more is known about the Parthenon in Byzantium than in antiquity, though “known” is an optimistic term here; rather, far more *can be known*. To alleviate this part of the problem, I have included in this book translations of most of the main sources for the Christian Parthenon.

¹ By 1904 it had been translated into Greek and revised by the Athenian paleographer and antiquarian Spyridon Lambros, who knew much about the topic.

² Bruno (1974a) 83.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88228-6 - The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens

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But the regression is only partly due to the difficulty and dispersion of the sources. More serious is the deep-seated assumption that Athens ceased to have any importance after Justinian's closing of the schools (usually dated to 529), that both as a physical city and a set of ideals Athens lost its relevance in a Christian world ruled by Constantinople. Not only did it have no history, it *could not* have had one; its time had passed.

According to the historical sources, no traveler (or almost none) visited Athens, which, at this time, was not a great city but a city without importance. Even when travelers arrived in cities that were rich in antiquities, they tended not to be very interested in them.³

The "historical sources," as we will see, say more or less exactly the opposite. Or consider the following, more lofty declaration:

After the eclipse of antiquity, sealed by the closing of the philosophical schools by Justinian, Athens lay forgotten for centuries, enshrouded by a mantle of silence. For the medieval pilgrim it offered no sacred relics and held no promises of spiritual renewal or salvation ... Athens' political and cultural ascendancy in the eastern Mediterranean disappeared with the demise of classical civilization and passed on to other urban centers as new societies appeared in the area.⁴

Conventional though they are, these statements are false – not misleading or exaggerated but contrary to reality. As this book aims to prove, Athens was not forgotten, for it became one of the most important religious centers of the Byzantine world, attracting hundreds if not thousands of pilgrims including many from outside the empire. As a shrine of the Theotokos, there were moments when it eclipsed the prestige even of Constantinople. Moreover, it offered one of the most appealing promises of salvation that any medieval pilgrim could hope for and, in addition, this promise was predicated on the classical past to which the Parthenon was always indissolubly linked. There is strong evidence for a fairly widespread interest in classical antiquities, which seem to have been central to the civic identities of the towns of Byzantine Greece and which also seem to have generated something of a tourist industry. It was in Byzantium, not in antiquity, that we first find what we might for the sake of emphasis call worship *of* rather

³ Ziolkowski (2005) 58, relying on Setton (1975b) III, the leading historian of medieval Athens after Gregorovius (though like him focusing on the Latin period). Studies of the image of Byzantine Athens present the same bleak picture: Lechner (1954) 92–94; Hunger (1990); di Branco (2005) 66. No history; Breitenbach (2003) 257. Note the title of Thompson (1959).

⁴ Augustinos (1994) 93.

than only *in* the Parthenon (and even the latter has been denied by some to the classical Parthenon, which seems not to have captured the aesthetic, religious, or philosophical attention of antiquity). And it was the Byzantine Athenians who first praised the temple's "divine light," not anyone in antiquity and certainly not the western travelers who usually receive the credit for this trope. They too were echoing a long Byzantine tradition, albeit unknowingly.

Byzantine Athens has not been denied a history because of the "sources" but because, as can easily be seen in the above quotations, it happens to lie in the path of a particular view of history, a view that deals in large abstractions. Here Athens and the classics all lie on one side of a great divide with Christianity and all that is medieval or Byzantine on the other. The two sides may not overlap for they represent incommensurate world-views. This is a picture familiar from many textbooks and specialist studies. The centers of classical civilization were eclipsed by new religious and political configurations. Where Delphi, Athens, and Rome had once been the centers of the world, now the center was placed at Jerusalem or Constantinople. Classical antiquity is believed to have been buried for over a thousand years before it was rediscovered (or reinvented) by the Europeans, its true and natural heirs.⁵ Athens was too closely linked to its classical past to play a leading role and so, with the passing of its era, no one has tried to imagine a contrary picture of its history, one in which the city "reinvents" itself to succeed in a changed world. The narrative of abstractions precludes creative engagement between pagan and Christian Athens. A hybrid such as the Byzantine Parthenon could have no history at this level because the thing was a contradiction in terms. The building's classical aspect was only a curiosity; at any rate, its conversion into a church – a philosophical incongruity – could take place only against a backdrop of Athenian decline and insignificance, which has accordingly been imagined and written into the history books before anyone bothered to look in the Byzantine sources.

Even the building's survival occasioned surprise. Pouqueville, a French traveler to Greece in the early nineteenth century, deplored the damage done to the monument by the Venetians and Elgin, but also asked: "How can one explain the Parthenon's preservation under the reign of Constantine and Theodosios – tyrants unworthy of the name 'great' [i.e., by extension, under all the Byzantine emperors] – who have destroyed more artistic masterpieces than the barbarians and the Turks?"⁶ Here Byzantium represents

⁵ For further reflection on this, see the Postscript.

⁶ Pouqueville (1827) v. V, pt. 1, 77–78; tr. in Augustinos (1994) 321 n. 52.

the antithesis, indeed the physical cancellation of classical antiquity, just as much as did the “barbarians,” e.g., the Persians, in sum all “Oriental,” despotic, un-Hellenic peoples like the Byzantines who were demonized by the Enlightenment. But why, then, did the monuments of Athens survive? Pouqueville knew nothing from the sources about this, so his quandary was caused purely by his own preconceptions. We have to remember through all of this that the Byzantines had done far *less* damage to the monument than had Elgin and the Venetians!

The discontinuity thesis has taken serious scholarly form since then; it is, after all, a position many of whose aspects have ample support in the sources. In the twentieth century, Cyril Mango has stressed the break between antiquity and Byzantium in terms of both literature and artistic heritage. I have addressed the question of literature elsewhere (that is, whether Byzantine classicizing texts are “distorting mirrors” that merely mimic ancient models without reflecting any of their underlying merits, values, or ideas).⁷ Regarding the antiquities of Greece in the Byzantine period, Mango articulated what has become the standard position for the past forty years. Most Byzantines, he argued, believed that ancient statues were inhabited by demons or possessed magical properties, and those who wrote about them were not interested in them as art but were only slavishly following ancient rhetorical conventions. In sum, “the Byzantines in general did not evince the slightest interest in what we understand by classical Greece.”⁸ This position has since echoed in the literature. “It is striking how little interest was shown by the inhabitants of the Byzantine empire ... in the relics of classical antiquity that were still to be found in the region where they lived,” resulting in an “alienation of the Greeks from their own early cultural phases.” After the rise of Christianity, “it was to be a thousand years before Christians turned their attention back to Italy and Greece as classical lands.”⁹

The position that Mango attacked in his argument for discontinuity – that “Byzantium was a beacon of classical civilization shining in the barbarous gloom of the Middle Ages” – has been far too marginal in the scholarship to merit such attention. It is a straw man, crudely put so as

⁷ See Kaldellis (2004) c. 1 on Mango (1975).

⁸ Statues: Mango (1963); no interest in Greece: (1965) 32; again: (1994). Mango highlights the evidence for demonology (and magic) over that for other interests (imperial, aesthetic, pragmatic, mythological, civic, etc.). See also the Postscript.

⁹ Respectively: van der Vin (1980) v. I, 310–311; Eisner (1991) 34. The opposite view, that the Byzantines (as opposed to the early Christians) loved and protected ancient art, is a function of Greek nationalism, e.g., Simopoulos (1993) 162 and c. 6 *passim*, but is not dominant even there.

to be easily refutable, and enables Mango to move to the opposite extreme. In a paper stressing discontinuity in the very title, he even draws attention to the fact that some Byzantines wore caftans and turbans and used prayer rugs. “I was not trying to prove that the Byzantines dressed and behaved like Arabs,” he adds,¹⁰ but the image sticks and raises the question of whether Byzantine Studies is an extension of the Classics or a species of Orientalism. It echoes Pouqueville’s (less scholarly) equation of the Byzantines with barbarians and Turks.

The notions that the Byzantines were not interested in ancient Greece and that they did not look upon Greece in their own time as a classical land are, as we will see, false, certainly when it came to Athens. To the contrary, it was difficult for them to speak of Athens at all without engaging directly with the problem of its classical past and the relation of that past to Christianity; they were *overaware* of the classical past, not blind or indifferent to it. But this should not be taken as an argument for continuity. Byzantium was not the same as classical antiquity; it is rather that many sites of its culture, even its Christian aspect, were constituted in dialogic relation to it. My goal is not to replace one monolithic, closed view of Byzantium with another, but to move away from the need to have one view in the first place and to stimulate a critical discussion about why a particular view has prevailed – a view prejudicial to Byzantium in the Enlightenment context of modern historiography – when the evidence taken all together presents a mixed picture. So, for example, whereas it is easy to find Byzantine sources that reflect the belief that demons inhabited statues and pagan ruins, I have not found that belief attested for Athens in particular. The filling of Constantinople with ancient statuary, to cite another example, had to do with aesthetics and imperial ideology, as has belatedly been recognized.¹¹ Therefore, to explain the success of the Christian Parthenon requires us to rethink Byzantine views of the classical past and scrutinize our field’s stake in the narratives of the Enlightenment (e.g., pagans vs. Christians, antiquity vs. the Middle Ages, reason vs. superstition, or freedom vs. theocracy and “oriental despotism”). If it is necessary to speak about history at this level of abstraction, we must recognize that all cultures are sites of conflict and disagreement and are riven by contradiction at the deepest level of their ideological foundations.

Modern writers were not the first to speak of “the end of Athens,” and the polarities of Athens vs. Jerusalem or vs. Constantinople are not of modern make. With the modern narrative of Athenian decline in the background,

¹⁰ Mango (1981) 51–52. Mango’s papers were reprinted in (1984a). ¹¹ Bassett (2004).

Cambridge University Press

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let us extend this section by looking at some of its ancient and Byzantine antecedents. The problem is in their interpretation and correct use, not merely in tracking them down and citing them as primary evidence, for they are not really evidence as such. It was Tertullianus (ca. 200) who first posed the famous rhetorical question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?,” to which he implied the answer “absolutely nothing.” The context of this claim was an argument that philosophy, man’s effort to attain the truth by unaided reason, was ultimately responsible for many Christian heresies. St. Paul had warned against it, for

he had been at Athens and had, in his discussions there, become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth. But in fact it only corrupts the truth, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? ... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition.¹²

Tertullianus eventually joined a sect that was condemned as heretical, but that irony pales before the impossible position that Christian intellectuals were taking with such lofty pronouncements. He himself was steeped in dialectic and disputation (Jerome later fancied him a lawyer), and never entirely shook off the formative influence of Stoic philosophy, even in his theology. In fact, it was only his familiarity with “Athens” that enabled him to make the case for Christianity that he did, and the same was true for all later Christian theologians. It proved impossible to expound Christian doctrine based solely on Scripture. The practical question, then, was not *whether* to use Greek philosophy but *how*, though on the level of rhetoric and propaganda almost all Christian theorists maintained that their faith had entirely supplanted the wisdom of the ancients, which was foolishness in the eyes of God. Still, an influential minority of Christian sophists (such as Gregorios of Nazianzos) was more honest than Tertullianus about what they owed to Athens, both the city and the ideal for which it stood. Athens had *something* to do with Jerusalem after all, but it was difficult to say exactly *what*, a tension that ran through Christian “humanism” and would, as we will see, run through the history of the Christian Parthenon as well.¹³

¹² Tertullianus, *On the Interdiction of Heretics* 7 (tr. p. 246, slightly modified). For his argument, see Sider (1980) 417–419.

¹³ For Gregorios and Athens, see McGuckin (2001) 16 n. 54, 53–83; for the problem of Christian Hellenism, Kaldellis (2007a) c. 3; for the image of Athens among the Fathers, Breitenbach (2003).

It was not easy for Athens to adapt to the Christian world. Named after its patron goddess, the city's reputation was ineluctably linked to the cults, myths, rituals, and art that many Christians had set out to abolish. The author of Acts notes, in connection with St. Paul's brief visit there, that the city was full of idols (17.16). Paul began his address before the Athenians by saying that he considered them to be "most religious" (17.22), but *deisidaimonia* can also mean superstition or religious in a negative way (especially if *daimones* were false deities). This is not necessarily what Paul meant but it is how his words would have been taken by later Christian readers. This reputation was compounded by the city's failure to convert in late antiquity. The pagan cults persisted and the city's intellectual life included and was even dominated by outspoken pagan Platonists until the sixth century. It required imperial intervention by that most Christian monarch, Justinian, to shut down the schools in AD 529 or 531.¹⁴ This pagan conservatism confirmed the suspicion held by many that the Athenian ideal itself was infected with the pagan aspects of Greek culture. Justinian's intervention has often been used as a symbolic date for the end of antiquity, especially in connection with the grand narrative.

Many Christians gloated over the end of Athens and the Athenian ideal. The liturgical poet of Justinian's Constantinople, Romanos Melodos, proclaimed the triumph of the "Galilaeans" over the Athenians, alluding sarcastically to the polemical term used by the last pagan emperor, Julian (AD 361–363), who loved Athens, in his attack on Christianity. In another poem, Romanos sneered at the nonsense of the pagan philosophers.¹⁵ The downfall of Athens, in other words, was literally celebrated from the pulpit of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. It was around this time (fifth to early seventh centuries) that the most famous hymn in Orthodoxy was composed. It is called the Akathistos because the congregation stands during it. In the Salutations of the Theotokos, it too gloats over the defeat of Athens:

Hail, vessel of God's wisdom,
Hail, repository of his providence,
Hail, you who reveal the philosophers as unwise,

¹⁴ For Paul at Athens, see the end of Chapter 1. For Athens in late antiquity, see Thompson (1959); Frantz (1988); Castrén (1994); summary in Saradi (2006) 238–239; for religion, Trombley (2001) v. I, c. 4; and Fowden (1990); for the epigraphy of the period, Sironen (1997); for date and background of the closing of the schools, Watts (2005) and (2006).

¹⁵ Romanos Melodos, *Kontakion* 31: *On the Mission of the Apostles* 16.2; cf. *Kontakion* 33: *On Pentecost* 17 (pp. 247 and 265); cf. Topping (1976) 12–13. In general, see Hunger (1984). For Julian against the Galilaeans, see his treatise by that title (v. III, pp. 311–433).

Cambridge University Press

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Hail, you who refute the vain weavers of words,
 Hail, for the bickerers are now feeble-minded,
 Hail, for the poets of myths have wasted away,
 Hail, you who sliced through the Athenians' twisting.¹⁶

In short, some of the most authoritative voices of the new faith in the new capital of the empire made a point of proclaiming the refutation of mere human wisdom by Christ and his Mother and broadcast the defeat of "Athens." Even after the end of paganism, popular readings continued to circulate in which Athens was depicted as indelibly stained by its past. In the *Life of Markos the Athenian*, a later fictional romance set in late antiquity, the saint equates "Hellenism" with "the persecution of the Christians," and thanks God for "leading me to this holy place [i.e., "Ethiopia"], lest I die in my own country [i.e., Athens] and be buried in earth that had been polluted by so many sins."¹⁷

Pagan Athens was rhetorically and physically eliminated. The Parthenon and other temples were converted into churches, and a villa near the agora that may have belonged to the last head of the Academy was taken over in the mid sixth century for use by the city's bishop.¹⁸ The shift to other centers was nicely reflected in the romance of Athenais, the daughter of a professor at Athens and a pagan. Around AD 420, she was selected as the bride of the emperor Theodosios II. Baptized as Eudokia, she settled in the court at Constantinople, but scandal later caused her to leave for Jerusalem and take up pious causes. The career of this empress who "quite literally preferred Jerusalem to Athens" was retold in many later Byzantine chronicles and tales.¹⁹ The rejection of Athens could take the form of polemical epigrams as well, which were written as late as the tenth century by Ioannes Geometres. "The city of Erechtheus sprang from the earth" – alluding to the ancient Athenians' autochthony – "but New Rome came from the heavens." Another epigram is about the "wise men of Athens": You keep talking about the ancient wise men, it sneers, but all you really have left is Mt. Hymettos and its honey, the tombs of the dead and the ghosts of the wise. By contrast, *our* city – Constantinople – has both faith and the words of true wisdom.²⁰

¹⁶ *Akathistos Hymnos* 17. The latest discussions date it to the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus (431) or shortly afterwards: Peltomaa (2001) and 186–187 for a brief commentary on this strophe; Pentcheva (2006) 15–16.

¹⁷ *Life of Markos the Athenian* 145, 161–163 (pp. 51–52). ¹⁸ Athanassiadi (1999) 342–347.

¹⁹ Cameron (1982) 279; also Holum (1982) c. 4; Burman (1994) 63–87; di Branco (2005) 88–95.

²⁰ Ioannes Geometres, *Poems* 109–110; cf. Hunger (1990) 51–52; Rhoby (2003) 76–77. For Geometres' life, see Lauxtermann (1998).

These texts can be (and have been) used to support the narrative of the end of Athens. After antiquity Athens could not compete directly with Rome or Jerusalem, for “the world of the future was Christian, while the greatness of Athens was unalterably pagan.”²¹ Its schools were shut down by Justinian, its art transported to Constantinople to adorn the Christian court and capital, and its ideals rejected by the authoritative spokesmen of the new religion. The city itself would have no real history, certainly no glory to match its classical past, at least not before the establishment of the modern Greek state in the nineteenth century.

That’s the way history *should have* happened, according to one view – only it did not, as a multitude of Byzantine sources reveals. What then of Tertullianus, Romanos Melodos, the Akathistos hymn, and Geometres? What must be stressed about them at this point is that they are not really “sources” at all, certainly not for what was happening at Athens. They were rhetorically expressing their commitment to a particular set of ideological priorities. They were not making historical or factual statements in the first place, but constructing a narrative of “Athens” and “Jerusalem” (or “New Jerusalem”) in which they had a personal stake. Tertullianus’ position was too compromised for us to take it at face value. As for Romanos, the Akathistos, and Geometres, their gloating was premature. Athens would prove capable of usurping the position of Constantinople as the Theotokos’ favored city, and in the language of the Akathistos itself no less! And an emperor of Geometres’ own time would also pay homage to the Atheniotissa, undermining the poet’s polarity of heaven and earth. We should not, then, as previous generations have done, rush to accept the view of Romanos, Geometres, and the like as exemplary of the Byzantine view and history of Athens.

The evidence presented in this book will reveal that these ideological pronouncements, which have been taken as canonical Byzantine views and even turned into history by many scholars, do not reflect the development of Athens as a Christian center in Byzantium. Not only was the city’s history different from that implied by the rhetoric of these texts but the mainstream Byzantine view of Athens turns out to have been far more positive and nuanced. This book will fill in that history for both the Parthenon and Byzantine Athens more generally – a history that is widely supposed not to exist – and it will also reveal the creative engagement at Athens between the classical and the Christian elements that both flowed into the making of Byzantine civilization. The fundamental dynamics of the culture were

²¹ Setton (1975b) III 180.

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different in this respect than what has long been believed. In the process, we will also uncover considerable evidence for the nuanced ideological, archaeological, and even psychological modalities that underlay the reception of ancient ruins and monuments in Byzantium, specifically in Greece. These were not in their essence modern. They were only rewritten later to accord with modern narratives. The shape of many familiar “histories” may have to be redrawn.