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

Anthony Kaldellis

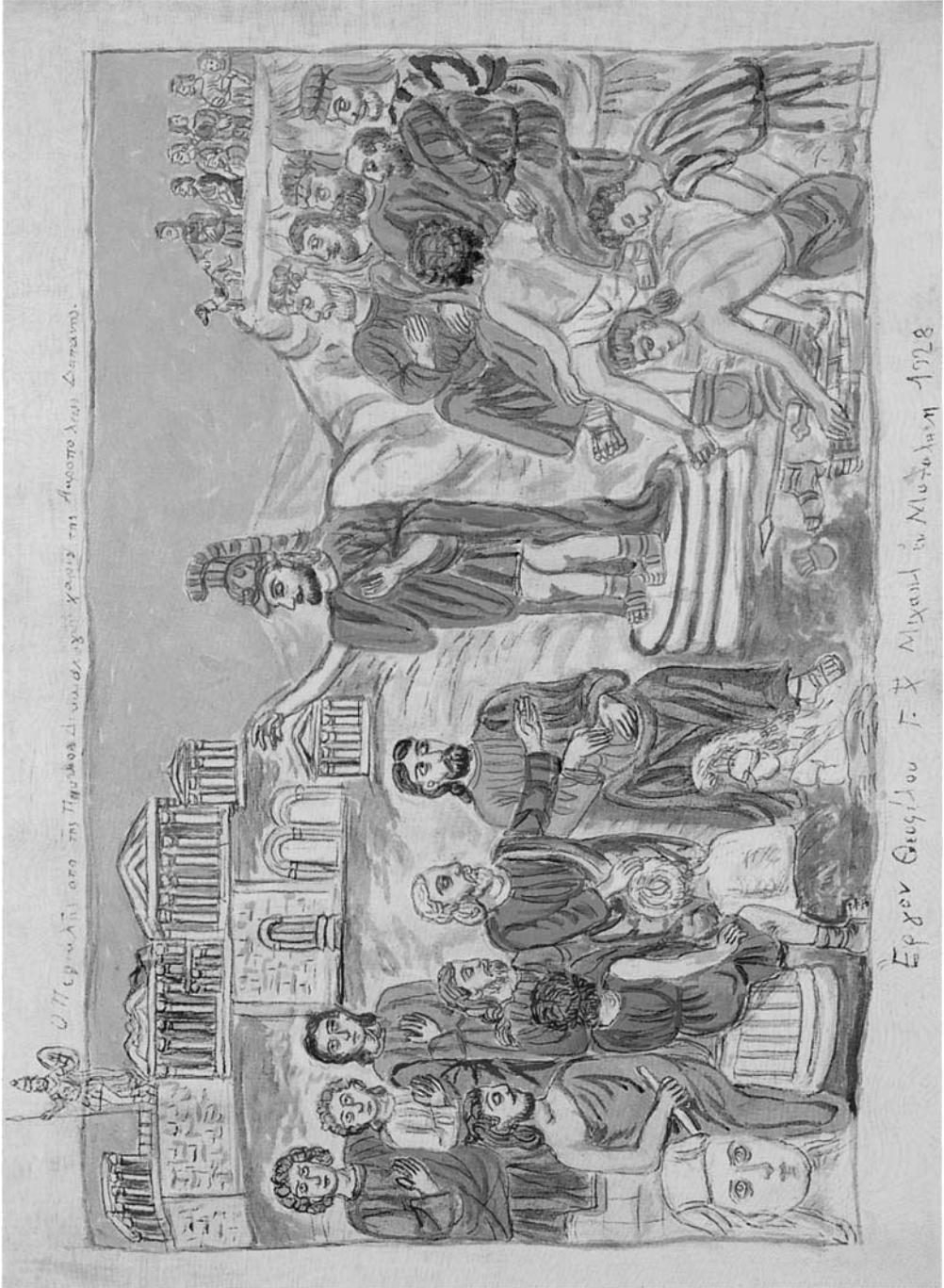
Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Christian Parthenon

Byzantine Athens was not a city without a history, as is commonly believed, but an important center about which much can now be said. Providing a wealth of new evidence, Professor Kaldellis argues that the Parthenon became a major site of Christian pilgrimage after its conversion into a church. Paradoxically, it was more important as a church than it had been as a temple: the Byzantine period was its true age of glory. He examines the idiosyncratic fusion of pagan and Christian culture that took place in Athens, where an attempt was made to replicate the classical past in Christian terms, affecting rhetoric, monuments, and miracles. He also reevaluates the reception of ancient ruins in Byzantine Greece and presents for the first time a form of pilgrimage that was directed not toward icons, Holy Lands, or holy men but toward a monument embodying a permanent cultural tension and religious dialectic.

ANTHONY KALDELLIS is Professor of Greek and Latin at The Ohio State University. He has published widely on topics in late antiquity and Byzantium, focusing on the literary and philosophical aspects of historiographical texts. His studies on the reception of classical culture in Byzantium recently culminated in the book *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (2007). He has also translated many Byzantine authors into English (among them Hesychios, Genesios, and Psellos) and one of his side-interests is the Byzantine history of the island of Lesbos.



Frontispiece Perikles on the Pnyx, justifying the Akropolis expenses (1928).

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ANTHONY KALDELLIS

The Ohio State University



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Frontmatter

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

Anthony Kaldellis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

List of figures [page vii]

Preface [xi]

Acknowledgments [xv]

Introduction [1]

Byzantine Athens: a city with no history? [1]

1. Conversions of the Parthenon [11]
 - The Parthenon in antiquity: a reassessment [11]
 - The pagan Parthenon in late antiquity [19]
 - From temple to church [23]
 - Triumph or continuity? [31]
 - What happened at Athens? [40]
 - The *Theosophy* oracle on the Parthenon [47]
 - St. Paul in Athens [53]
2. From students to pilgrims in medieval Athens
(AD 532–848) [60]
 - The collapse of the late Roman city [60]
 - Traveling to Athens in the Dark Age [63]
 - Athens and Constantinople [72]
 - Inscriptions of the Christian Parthenon [74]
3. Imperial recognition: Basileios II in Athens
(AD 1018) [81]
 - An emperor in Athens [81]
 - Interpreting imperial pilgrimage [86]
4. Pilgrims of the middle period (AD 900–1100) [92]
 - Murder in the Parthenon [92]
 - Loukas of Steiris [96]
 - Nikon “Repent!” [97]
 - Phantinos the Younger [101]
 - Meletios the Younger and the rehabilitation of Athena [103]
 - Saewulf, Guido, and the light of Athens [107]

Cambridge University Press

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

Anthony Kaldellis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

5. The apogee of the Atheniotissa in the twelfth century [112]
 - Athens in the twelfth century [113]
 - Georgios Bourtzes (1153–1160) [122]
 - Nikolaos Hagiotheodorites (1160–1175) [125]
 - Pilgrims and the piety of the Athenians [129]
 - The festival of the Atheniotissa [133]
 - Brand-naming and exporting the Atheniotissa [137]
 6. Michael Choniates: a classicist-bishop and his cathedral
(AD 1182–1205) [145]
 - The Parthenon as consolation [145]
 - The Parthenon in the late twelfth century [149]
 - Choniates between past and present [156]
 - Leon Sgouros (1204) and the end of Byzantine Athens [162]
 7. Why the Parthenon? An attempt at interpretation [166]
 - The mysterious success of Christian Athens [166]
 - Athens' meager Christian credentials [168]
 - Deconstructing the Christian Parthenon [173]
 - Ancient ruins and the Byzantine beholder: a view of the "sights"
in Greece [178]
 - Conclusion: archaeology, polysemy, success [191]
 8. The light of the Christian Parthenon [196]
 - Postscript: some Byzantine heresies [207]
- Appendix: the Little Metropolis* [212]
Bibliography [215]
Index [249]

Figures

Frontispiece. *Perikles on the Pnyx, justifying the Akropolis expenses* (1928). The Theophilos Museum and Municipality of Mytilene. [page ii]

1. Athena Parthenos, marble miniature copy of the Roman period (National Archaeological Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [13]
2. Plan of the classical Parthenon by Manolis Korres, used by permission; the numbers in the plan are by Anthony Kaldellis. [24]
3. Parthenon chamber, view from the southwest corner; drawing by M. Korres, used by permission. [24]
4. Plan of the Christian Parthenon, first and second apse; drawings and key by M. Korres, used by permission. [25]
5. Interior of the Parthenon chamber after the late antique fire; drawing by M. Korres, used by permission. [26]
6. Roof of the Christian Parthenon; drawing by M. Korres, used by permission. [28]
7. Parthenon apse frieze (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [29]
8. Parthenon ambo (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [30]
9. Tetraconch church in the courtyard of Hadrian's library (Roman agora, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [32]
10. Tower of the Winds (Roman agora, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [33]
11. "Annunciation" metope. Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [41]
12. Fragment of Ikaria inscription with an oracle of Apollo also in the *Tübingen Theosophy*. Photo: A. Matthaiou and G. Papadopoulos, *Ἐπιγραφαὶ Ἰκαρίας*, Athens: Greek Epigraphical Society, 2003, fig. 22.2; used by permission. [52]
13. Parthenon column inscriptions 57, 58, 61, 62. Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [76]

14. Parthenon column inscriptions 54, 55, 56, 59, 60. Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [77]
15. Lion of the Peiraeus (Venice), drawn by F. Lindström; taken from K. Gjerset, *History of the Norwegian People*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915. [84]
16. Mosaic of St. Nikon “Repent!” at the monastery of Hosios Loukas. Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [98]
17. Ancient capital and Byzantine frescos in the church of the Holy Apostles (Athens, agora). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [115]
18. Two Byzantine churches in the Athenian agora: the Holy Apostles and St. Georgios by the Kerameikos (formerly the temple of Hephaistos). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [116]
19. Place-names of Athens based on the *praktikon*; drawing from E. Granstrem, I. Medvedev, and D. Papachryssanthou, “Fragment d’un praktikon de la région d’Athènes (avant 1204),” *Revue des Études Byzantines* 34 (1976) 26; used by permission of the journal. [117]
20. Place-names of Attica based on the *praktikon*; drawing from E. Granstrem, I. Medvedev, and D. Papachryssanthou, “Fragment d’un praktikon de la région d’Athènes (avant 1204),” *Revue des Études Byzantines* 34 (1976) 20; used by permission of the journal. [119]
21. Digenes plate from the agora, from A. Frantz, *The Middle Ages in the Athenian Agora* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1961). Image used by permission of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations. [136]
22. Michael Choniates’ seal (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens); drawing by G. Christodoulou. [138]
23. Soumela monastery in Pontos, Turkey. Photo: Dr. Alam Payind, Director of the Middle East Studies Center, The Ohio State University; used by permission. [141]
24. The twelfth-century apse; drawing by M. Korres, used by permission. [150]
25. Parthenon *phialê*; drawing by A. Xyngopoulos; taken from D. I. Pallas, “Η φιάλη του χριστιανικού Παρθενῶνος,” *Byzantinisch-neugriechischen Jahrbucher* 10 (1932–1934) 194. [152]
26. Surviving portions of the Parthenon *phialê* inscription (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [153]

27. Parthenon interior. Photo: P. Sebah (1872–1875); from the archive of the Acropolis Restoration Service (YSMA); image provided by the Committee for the Conservation of the Acropolis Monuments (ESMA); used by permission. [153]
28. Parthenon paintings I, from N. H. J. Westlake, “On Some Ancient Paintings in Churches of Athens,” *Archaeologia: Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 51 (1888) 173–188. [154]
29. Parthenon paintings II, from N. H. J. Westlake, “On Some Ancient Paintings in Churches of Athens,” *Archaeologia: Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 51 (1888) 173–188. [154]
30. Image of Michael Choniates from the church of St. Peter, Kalyvia Koubara, Attica (1232; copy in the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [164]
31. The temple of Zeus in Athens, showing the remains of the medieval superstructure. Photo: James Robertson; taken from *Photographs by James Robertson: “Athens and Grecian Antiquities”, 1853–1854, from the Photographic Archive of the Benaki Museum* (© Benaki Museum, Athens, 1998) 113; used by permission of the Benaki Museum. [172]
32. Victory monument of Lysikrates (Plaka, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [182]
33. Middle Byzantine panel with sphinxes (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [192]
34. Reused classical relief (funerary, fourth century BC) with secondary Byzantine ivy carving (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [192]
35. Byzantine centaur with lute and female dancer (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [193]
36. Panagia Gorgoepikoos (Athens). Photo: Anthony Kaldellis. [213]

Preface

This book unveils for the first time a nearly 1,000-year-long chapter in the history of the Parthenon and the city of Athens, namely the Byzantine phase of their existence. Studies of the post-classical Parthenon have so far focused on the travelers of early modern Europe,¹ and strongly imply or state that nothing of any deep cultural or philosophical significance happened during the Byzantine era, indeed that it *could not* have happened because the Byzantines did not have the same relation to the classical past as do the Europeans. The result has been an appropriation of the Parthenon as a defining monument of the modern West and a denial of it to others, especially Byzantium. But this study argues, on the basis of extensive evidence assembled and, in some cases, uncovered here for the first time, that after antiquity Athens and the classical legacy that it still represented in the minds of many Byzantines did not vanish from the stage of history as has been asserted. The Parthenon, converted into a church, became an important site of pilgrimage whose fame spread throughout the Christian world. Yet contrary to the modes of Byzantine piety, what attracted pilgrims and adoration were not any sacred relics or icons that were kept there but rather the Parthenon itself, the building, whose classical past was known and, indeed, quite visible. Christian devotion was here engaged in a direct and continuous dialogue with antiquity, in the very seat of its classical greatness. The building was even believed to have mystical properties: a divine light emanated within or from its ancient marble walls. In some cases, it is difficult to know whether honor was being directed at the church or the Mother of God to whom it had been reconsecrated. Certainly, the Parthenon had never received this kind of attention in antiquity itself. It was now honored by emperors, visited by saints, inscribed with the

¹ E.g., Norre (1966); Pavan (1983); Beard (2002); Yalouri (2001) is about modern Greece. The travelers themselves have their own specialized bibliography, e.g., Eisner (1991); Augustinos (1994); Giakovaki (2006).

names of many pilgrims, and praised by orators in glowing terms. The Theotokos Atheniotissa was famous in Rome, Constantinople, and the East. This book traces for the first time the Orthodox history of this classical monument and attempts to explain why and how it became so important in a pre-modern, pre-European Christian world. It is exciting and amazing that such discoveries can still be made.

Obviously, there are many interpretive frameworks into which this new history can be situated. One can, for instance, use the new textual evidence to supplement what has been the main (in fact, the only) direction of research on the Byzantine Parthenon so far, namely the archaeological. I have resisted this approach, first because I am no archaeologist and, second, because the textual evidence tells us different *kinds* of things than does archaeology and I want to uncover its own tensions and dynamics. One can also study this material from the standpoint of medieval Mariolatry, the adoration of the Mother of God, which took a highly unusual form in Byzantine Athens that has not yet been studied or even recognized. There were moments when middle Byzantine Athens eclipsed even Constantinople as the special city of the Theotokos. But this dimension of the story I also leave to experts in other fields than mine. The framework that I use for my analysis here is largely that of the reception of the classical tradition, namely how Byzantine Christians adapted the mixed legacy that they inherited from the ancient world. The emphasis is not on “continuity” but on the creative aspects and historical dimension of the cultural tension between Hellenism and Christianity. It calls for close readings of the texts that mention and so interpret the Parthenon for medieval audiences, for philological art-history. Secondary themes brought into the discussion are the questions of medieval pilgrimage and civic identity.

I had never planned to write this book, but while reading through the original sources for a broader project, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, I kept coming across references to Athens and the Parthenon. At first, I thought a brief article could bring attention to these texts and ask the basic questions of interpretation, but the evidence continued to pile up. And this was the Parthenon, after all, always on the horizon as I was growing up. It is not an insignificant topic in itself, and so I decided that its forgotten history deserved a longer study.

Some disclaimers are in order. This book focuses on the Parthenon and its veneration by Christians and does not offer a full history of Byzantine Athens, though digressions at key moments discuss the historical context

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

and give a sense of the life and topography of the city. Chronologically, the book covers the years from AD 400 to 1200. Partly for reasons of space I have not fully explored here Athens in late antiquity (second to sixth centuries), except to the degree that it provides a background for the conversion of the Parthenon into a church. The society, intellectual life, and religious and economic transformations of Athens in late antiquity are large and exciting topics that have not yet been fully addressed. The evidence (textual, archaeological, and prosopographical) is very rich, and so cannot be adequately covered here. Briefly, in that period the city boasted many prominent professors of philosophy and rhetoric, especially the anti-Christian Neoplatonists and some even more famous students, such as the future emperor Julian and the future Church Father Gregorios of Nazianzos. The city was sacked three times, by the Scandinavian Heruls (AD 267), by Alaric's Goths (AD 396), and by the Slavs (ca. 580). It remained a bastion of paganism and anti-Christian thought until quite late, indeed almost up to the very end. But it is the aim of the present study to argue that the closing of the schools by Justinian (ca. AD 529) and the catastrophes of the seventh century did not spell the "end" for Athens' classical civilization, as is not merely *usually* but rather *always* assumed.

Finally, a note on conventions. I have generally avoided the term "Virgin," which is not what the Theotokos and Theometor ("Mother of God") is normally called in Orthodox tradition. The term "Parthenos," which does mean Virgin, I have usually left untranslated because when used by Byzantine writers it was complicit in the negotiation between the classical past and Christian present of the temple on the Akropolis. Byzantine names are not Latinized or Anglicized but spelled correctly, except where they would not be easily recognized.

A note on the jacket image

A 'classic' photograph of the Parthenon would not be appropriate for a book such as this, and has been used too often on book covers anyway. The early modern sketches and paintings by western travelers depict a post-Byzantine phase of the city's history and would be misleading. I have opted for a work of Theophilos Hatzimichael (1870–1934), a folk painter from my native island of Lesbos who adorned the walls of many homes and shops with scenes from Greek history and daily life. His interest in the classical past, along with his figures in the Byzantine iconic

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Anthony Kaldellis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

Preface

tradition, make his painting of “Perikles on the Pnyx justifying the Akropolis expenses” (1928) the closest we have to a view of how the Byzantines themselves might have imagined ancient Athens, as some of them tried to do (see pp. 156–157 below). For permission to use this image I thank the Municipality of Mytilene, Lesbos, and its mayor Nasos Giakalis.

Acknowledgments

This book owes a great debt to the work of many philologists and archaeologists, who continue to bring texts and artifacts to light, often without knowing what future projects they are enabling, and often too without thanks. Assembling the scattered pieces of this puzzle confirmed for me the importance of publishing recovered knowledge, no matter how small each piece may seem by itself.

I have also incurred specific debts. Audiences at the Department of Greek and Latin of the Ohio State University; the Modern Greek Program and Department of Classics of the University of Michigan; the Department of History of the University of California, San Diego; the Workshop on Late Antiquity and Byzantium at the University of Chicago; and the Byzantine Studies Conference (2006) asked penetrating questions and provided additional data. I am grateful for those invitations. Amy Papalexandrou, Bill Caraher, and Tasos Tanoulas read earlier versions of the book and made valuable comments, sharing their time and expertise. So did the two readers appointed by the Press, one of them Liz James, whose comments corrected particular flaws and improved the organization and presentation. The tough love of Polymnia Athanassiadi saved me from a weak introduction, for which, in retrospect, I am especially grateful. The book has also benefited from discussions with Giorgos Anagnostou, Stephanos Efthymiades, Nasia Giakovaki, Tim Gregory, Vassilios Lampropoulos, Artemis Leontis, Carolina López Ruiz, Titos Papamastorakis, and Lina Saradi, who generously shared their own publications and thoughts. I thank Anne-Marie Helvetius for Ghislain; Rob Nelson for light in Byzantine churches; and Nicolette Trahoulia for helping me rule out the Alexander romance. Wendy Watkins efficiently provided material from the Center for Epigraphical and Palaeographical Studies, and the College of Humanities made possible a research trip to Greece at a key moment.

This project required that I look beyond my usual textual preoccupations. Among its greatest pleasures were the discussions and experiences I have had with the architects and conservators working on the Parthenon and Propylaia, who were unflinchingly supportive (despite my Byzantine

heresies) and who freely gave information, books, and the opportunity to examine the monuments on a day I will not forget. Some of the photographs capture what I saw. The Acropolis Restoration Service (YSMA) is a model agency, the most courteous, scholarly, and professional I have dealt with, whose attention to detail is exactly what is needed to ensure the future of the temples. I thank especially Fani Mallouchou-Tufano, Tasos Tanoulas, and Manolis Korres, to whom we owe what we know about the monuments' ancient, Byzantine, and modern history. They deserve some of the credit for this book's contributions as well (though none of the blame for its errors).

Most of the photographs in the book were taken by me. Manolis Korres graciously allowed me to reproduce his drawings of the ancient and Byzantine Parthenon. Thanks are due to Angelos Matthaïou, Georgios Papadopoulos, and the Greek Epigraphical Society for permission to use Fig. 12, which they also graciously supplied to me; to Albert Failler for permission to reproduce Figs. 19 and 20 from the *Revue des Études Byzantines* (1976); to Dr. Alam Payind, Director of the Middle East Studies Center of the Ohio State University, for his spectacular photograph of Soumela (Fig. 23); to the Committee for the Conservation of the Acropolis Monuments (ESMA) for making Fig. 27 available to me from the archives of the Acropolis Restoration Service (YSMA), and to Fani Mallouchou-Tufano for obtaining that permission on my behalf; to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations, for permission to reproduce Fig. 21; and to the Photographic Archive of the Benaki Museum, Athens, for permission to reproduce Fig. 31. Julia D'Agostino of the College of Humanities' Digital Media Services Studio scanned many of the images; her expertise instantly solved my technical difficulties.

I especially thank Michael Sharp of Cambridge University Press for his early interest and support for this project as well as for his support of Byzantine Studies in general; thanks also to the entire team at the Press (Liz Noden, Rosina Di Marzo, and all whose names I don't know) for seeing the book through to completion with such efficiency and good cheer.

This book is dedicated with love to Kim Vogel, *heptakis*.