PART I

Style

1 The *Christian Topography* (Vat. gr. 699) revisited: image, text, and conflict in ninth-century Byzantium

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The Byzantines were different from modern western cultures in most respects, but, like us, they rewrote history and remade images to justify and authorize contemporary life. This process is most clearly visible in periods of change in Byzantium. The best-known of these transitional periods is that involving Iconoclasm, and my focus here will be on one combination of words and pictures that was produced in the wake of that debate. Byzantine Iconoclasm – the opposition to religious portraiture, and particularly portraits of Christ – emerged during the reign of the emperor Leo III, though there is little evidence that Leo himself was a keen supporter of either the anti-image (iconoclast) or pro-image (iconophile) faction. The first official imperial pronouncements in support of Iconoclasm appeared in 754 under Constantine V (741–75), and it was officially halted twelve years after his death by the Seventh Ecumenical Council held at Nicaea in 787. Iconoclasm was reinstated nearly thirty years later, in 815; it finally ended in 843, though at the time no one was certain that it would not recur, and arguments condemning the iconoclasts continued throughout the ninth and into the early years of the tenth century. Iconoclasm itself is thus composed of four periods of transition – the mid-eighth century, the years around 787 and around 815, and the second half of the ninth century – which are far enough apart to suggest that some degree of resignation to whichever dogma prevailed had set in by the time of the next shift, but close enough together for the opposing doctrine to be within living memory of at least some inhabitants of Constantinople and its immediate environs, where the imperial decrees and ecclesiastical canons that dictated Iconoclasm presumably had the greatest impact. The conflict may not have remained uppermost in the minds of most Byzantines throughout the roughly 120 years of its duration, but the recurring vacillation between the two opposing camps – iconoclasts and iconophiles – presumably suggested, to whichever side was on the ascendancy at any given moment, the need to cement its position as firmly as possible. The alternation between the two official positions also meant that people changed sides: some, it seems, more or less depending on which way

the wind was blowing; others out of a professed change of heart, which may or may not have been genuine.[1]

Some of the most crucial texts on which we base our analyses of Iconoclasm were invented after the fact for precisely these reasons. Marie-France Auzépy, for example, has shown that the sense of monolithic monastic opposition to Iconoclasm impressed on modern scholars by late eighth- and ninth-century texts was largely fabricated in the aftermath (or interstices) of the controversy by leaders of the Studios monastery, who thereby vindicated their own position;[2] she has also argued convincingly that the famous tale of the icon over the Chalke gate – which, as related by later Byzantine sources, tells us that this icon was destroyed by the emperor Leo III in 726 or 730 as his first overt iconoclast act – was invented around the year 800: this icon evidently never existed before Iconoclasm at all.[3] Images, too, participated in the restructuring of the Byzantine world, and after Iconoclasm (and probably during the interim period 787–815 as well, when religious images were officially tolerated) newly invented formulations were inserted seamlessly within older sequences.[4] The reconstruction of the world provided by images, however, differs somewhat from that supplied by texts. Texts and images communicate in different forms and in different ways, and they thereby nuance information differently: in the years after Iconoclasm, for example, one set of images, embedded in a text that was of questionable orthodoxy, communicated a message quite distinct from that of its adjoining text. Those images, a series of miniatures in a manuscript now known as the *Christian Topography*, are my subject here.

What follows falls into four sections: an introduction to the text, and then to the Vatican manuscript that includes it; the critical problem that the manuscript poses; and, finally, an answer to one of the questions that the manuscript raises. The fundamental issue underlying much of this article is, however, broader than the schematic outline just provided might suggest. My overarching concern is how ninth-century Byzantine images dealt with the past and made it palatable to the present. This is in fact an issue of particular relevance for manuscript studies, for most ninth-century manuscripts with illustrations had ancestors, and ninth-century miniaturists (or their patrons) thus had to deal directly with reframing the past. How this was done has been demonstrated for many manuscripts of the period. In the ninth-century marginal psalters, for example, a number of polemical images were grafted into a core sequence that had been established well before Iconoclasm; the Paris Gregory (c. 880) displays a thorough and

exegetical revamping of earlier formulae.[5] But while other ninth-century manuscripts have been the subject of a spate of recent books and articles, the *Christian Topography* in the Vatican (Bibliotheca Apostolica, codex graecus 699) has received surprisingly little attention.

The text of the *Christian Topography* was written in Alexandria in the mid-sixth century.[6] By the eleventh century, the invented name Kosmas Indikopleustes had attached itself to the text, though Wanda Wolska-Conus has recently argued that the true author was one Konstantinos of Antioch.[7] The confusion is not surprising, for the name Konstantinos appears on no preserved copy of the text; though the author revealed a number of biographical details, he identified himself, simply, as 'a Christian'.[8] The controversial theories expressed in the *Topography* may have provoked this timorous signature,[9] though the full ramifications of these theses are somewhat obscured by their haphazard manner of presentation. Konstantinos/Kosmas mixed descriptions of his merchant voyages, tales of the wonders he had seen, polemics against his critics and asides on his poor health, with theological excursions of a distinctly Nestorian cast.[10] Yet throughout this chaotic agglomerate runs a consistent theme. Despite the many tangents and seemingly incidental asides, the bulk of the text is devoted to proving Konstantinos/Kosmas's thesis that the shape of the world – its topography – had been revealed to humanity by God: the world, according to our author, was in the form of the tabernacle of Moses (Fig. 1.1).[11]

Throughout the text of the *Christian Topography* there are references to miniatures or diagrams meant to clarify Konstantinos/Kosmas's theories. This, coupled with the fact that the three surviving Byzantine copies of the *Topography* – the one in Rome, one in Florence (Biblioteca Laurenziana, pluteus 9.28), and one at Sinai (Monastery of St Catherine, graecus 1186) – are all copiously illustrated, suggests the text always travelled with pictures.[12] The oldest witness to this tradition is the Vatican copy, the only one of the three predating the year 1000.

The Vatican *Christian Topography* is written in the slanting uncial characteristic of a group of often de luxe manuscripts produced in the second half of the ninth century, including the *Homilies* of Gregory of Nazianzos in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, graecus 510), mentioned earlier.[13] Iconographical formulae in these two ninth-century manuscripts also frequently correspond; and both share a number of iconographical peculiarities with the ninth-century marginal psalters.[14] Because the basic core of the *Christian Topography* was already present in the sixth-century

1.1 The world in the shape of the tabernacle: Vat. gr. 699, f. 39r

text on which the producers of the Vatican copy relied, it is clear that both the script and various iconographical details within the images were updated by the scribe and the miniaturist, respectively, to conform with contemporary ninth-century practice. The style of the painting also points to the ninth century, and particularly to Constantinople in the last two decades of the century: the closest formal comparisons to the *Topography* miniatures appear once again in the Paris *Homilies*, made between 879 and 882 for the emperor Basil I.[15]

Palaeography, iconography, and style seem, then, to support a late ninth-century date, and a Constantinopolitan origin, for the Vatican *Christian Topography*. However, Julien Leroy, who published the most thorough codicological assessment of the manuscript, came to a different conclusion.[16] He noted the virtually square format of the *Topography* (332 mm high × 337/342 mm wide), and pointed out that the square format was characteristic of early Greek codices, but not of ninth-century Byzantine ones; this, in turn, led him to speculate that the Vatican *Topography* was not made in Constantinople.[17] There are some problems with this thesis. First, as Leroy himself observed, the outer margin of the Vatican manuscript has been trimmed:[18] it would, originally, have been wider than it is now. Rather than approximating a square, the Vatican *Topography* once was more rectangular, though most unusually it showed a greater horizontal than vertical

span. More important, the Vatican *Topography* is not, in fact, as different from other Constantinopolitan products as Leroy implied: while the ratio of height to width of the eighth- and ninth-century manuscripts cited by Leroy ranges from 1.33 to 1.55, as opposed to the 0.98 of the Vatican manuscript, the assuredly ninth-century (and Constantinopolitan) marginal psalter now at Mount Athos, Pantokrator 61, is, with a ratio of 1.14, mid-way between the *Topography* and Leroy's group of comparanda.[19] Though the psalter Pantokrator 61 and, especially, the *Topography* are less rectangular than most Byzantine books, the square pages of the Vatican *Topography* do not demand a non-Constantinopolitan origin.

Leroy also suggested that the indifferent quality of the parchment (particularly its yellowish colour) and the ruling system used in the manuscript argued for a south Italian rather than a Constantinopolitan origin.[20] In fact, the parchment quality is inconsistent, and throughout the book there is considerable variation in the thickness and colour of the folia. The size of the manuscript may have made the collection of uniform sheets of sufficient height and width difficult, and indifferently prepared parchment is anyway also found in certain Constantinopolitan manuscripts, as Leroy himself observed.[21] Nonetheless, Leroy could not believe that a de luxe manuscript such as the *Topography* would have been produced on inferior parchment in Constantinople. Because the ruling system used in the *Topography* (type Lake II 1h), and the prickings that guide it, find numerous parallels in Italy, Leroy concluded that the manuscript was written in south Italy, and sent unillustrated to Constantinople, where it received its miniatures.[22] This is extremely unlikely. The miniaturist by and large followed the lead of the sixth-century original, and so must have had access to an earlier illustrated copy of the text. If the book had been sent to Constantinople fully written, with spaces left in the text for illustrations, we would be forced to assume one of two improbable scenarios: either that its illustrated model was sent along with it, in which case why not copy both text and image in Constantinople; or that the Italian scribe knew that the Constantinopolitan recipient had an illustrated copy of the text available for a painter to consult, in which case an illustrated copy of the *Topography* existed in the Byzantine capital and there was no need to import a version from Italy.

But if Leroy's solution does not convince, his discomfort with the apparent discrepancy between the codicology, on the one hand, and the palaeography and imagery, on the other, has been shared by others. While Leroy's belief that the parchment would not have been used in Constantinople persuaded him to discard the possibility that an Italian scribe working in the

Byzantine capital was responsible for the manuscript, Cavallo has more recently speculated that Vat. gr. 699 was written in Italy and illustrated there by a miniaturist trained in Constantinople.[23] Peripatetic scribes – though not miniaturists – are certainly attested in the eighth and ninth centuries,[24] but such special pleading is not really necessary.

Technical cross-overs between Constantinople and, especially, the Greek-speaking parts of Italy are not unusual in the ninth century.[25] It appears that the ability to produce cloisonné enamel, for example, spread from Italy to Byzantium around the year 800, and that later in the ninth century the idea of painted initials in texts was also imported from, probably, Rome to Constantinople.[26] In other instances, the direction of influence is unclear: the introduction of glazed ceramic ware probably moved from Constantinople (where it appears as glazed white ware) to Italy (where it appears as Forum ware) in the seventh century, but the appearance of minuscule script in Carolingian Latin and Byzantine Greek books occurred more or less simultaneously around the year 800.[27] At the same time, ruling patterns found in Rome recur in manuscripts associated with the Stoudios monastery;[28] clearly, ruling practices were one of the technical features that travelled between Italy and Constantinople in the ninth century. If neither the parchment nor the ruling pattern requires an Italian place of origin, the palaeographical, iconographical, and formal links with secure Constantinopolitan products compel the attribution of the Vatican *Topography* to the Byzantine east rather than to Italy.

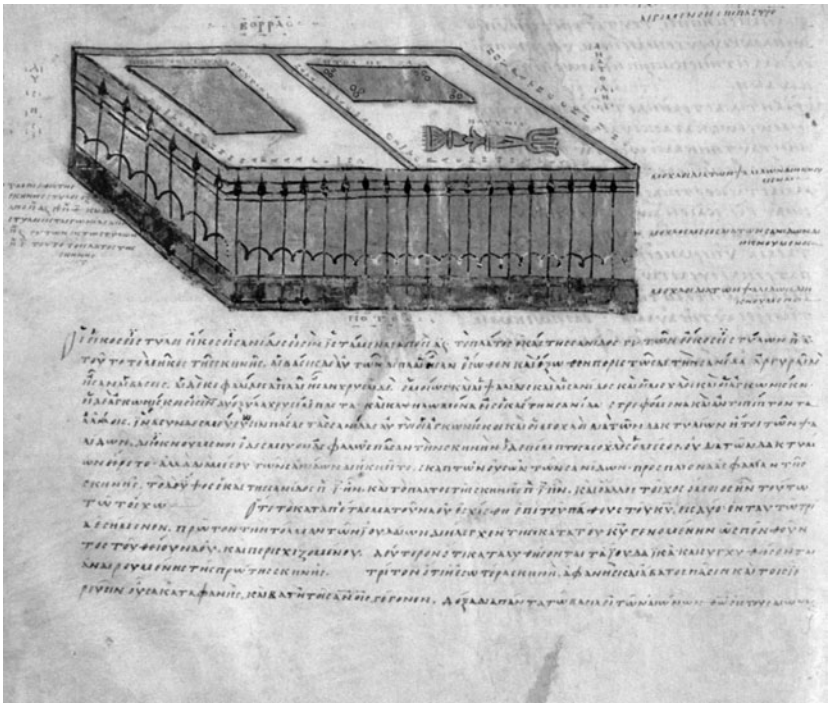
Locating the Vatican *Topography* in late ninth-century Constantinople raises a new set of problems. For while a remarkable number of ninth-century Byzantine manuscripts with miniatures survive, and the types of texts selected for illustration are quite diverse, the Vatican copy of the *Christian Topography* is the only ninth-century Byzantine manuscript to illustrate a text of questionable orthodoxy. Konstantinos/Kosmas espoused ideas reliant on Nestorios and the Nestorians gathered at Nisibis,[29] and Nestorios was certainly considered heretical in the ninth century: one of the iconophile accusations against the iconoclasts, in fact, was that the iconoclasts were repeating the heresies of Nestorios.[30] Furthermore, one of the rare comments about the *Topography* text that has been preserved dates from the ninth century, and it is – as one might expect in this context – heavily critical.[31] This comment comes from Photios, patriarch of Constantinople, and was included in his *Bibliotheca*, a series of 'book reviews' begun in the mid-ninth century and probably updated sporadically until about 875.[32] Photios wrote, in part:

I read a book called 'Book of the Christian', a commentary on the Octateuch . . . Vulgar in expression, it ignores conventional syntax; in addition, it is full of implausible scientific theories. It would be fair to see this man as an author of fables . . . He offers as well other absurdities.[33]

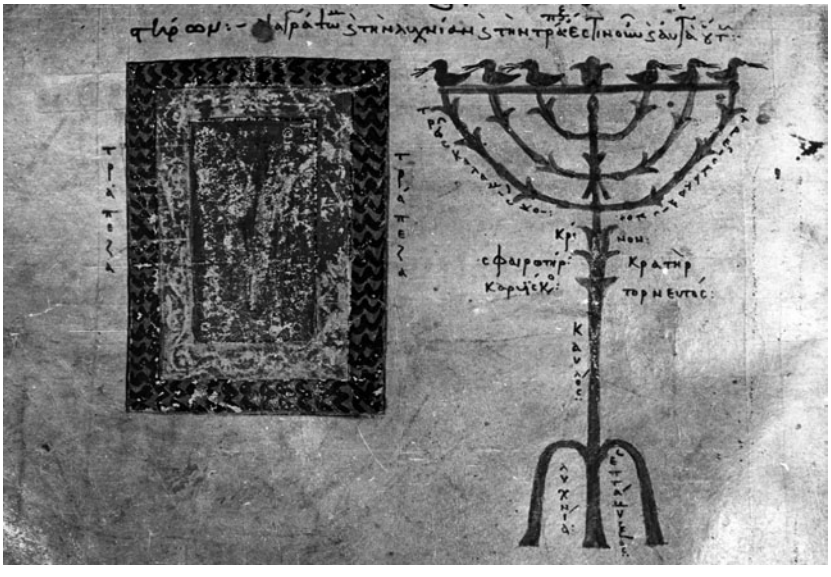
In short, when the Vatican *Topography* was made, the text itself was being unfavourably reviewed, and the ideas underlying it had been condemned as heretical.

The three Byzantine copies of the *Christian Topography* attest to its relative popularity despite its 'vulgar' style and questionable content. Nonetheless, to find the most luxurious of these three copies in the ninth century is curious. The ninth century was a period characterized by its use of the visual to promote orthodoxy and to combat heresy; staying within the medium of manuscript painting, the more or less complete ninth-century marginal psalters in Moscow and on Mount Athos, the Paris *Homilies* of Gregory Nazianzos, and the Paris *Sacra Parallela* all incorporate visual arguments in favour of Orthodox dogma and the newly consolidated theology of images.[34] Because the defeat of the iconoclast position was not so obviously final to Byzantines in the second half of the ninth century, imagery produced at this time was both self-justifying and formed an important weapon in a larger arsenal directed against all enemies of the now Orthodox truth. In part for this reason, the self-consciously polemical and exegetical miniatures that are so conspicuous in the ninth and early tenth centuries accompany texts of unblemished orthodoxy: the Bible, the gospels, the psalter, the book of Job, the *Homilies* of Gregory of Nazianzos, and the florilegium attributed to John of Damascus (the *Sacra Parallela*). In this context, the Vatican *Christian Topography* is a true anomaly. The question to be raised is simple: why was the Vatican *Christian Topography* made at all?

The answer to this question can be found by looking at one particular section of the *Topography* text, Book V. Book V is the longest of the twelve books that make up the *Topography*; it is, in fact, almost as long as all of the other books put together. It contains the most coherent expression of Konstantinos/Kosmas's arguments, and includes, in particular, a detailed consideration of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, followed by a discussion of the major and minor prophets.[35] This is the only section of the text that Photios did not condemn outright, but simply described: 'In a sort of excursus he [the author] makes mention of Genesis and Exodus, and he attaches a treatment of the tabernacle and its meaning. He runs through the prophets, then the apostles.'[36] The prophets and apostles are



1.2 The tabernacle in its precinct: Vat. gr. 699, f. 46v



1.3 The shewbread table and seven-branched candlestick: Laur. plut. 9.28, f. 111v