

ONE

THE BYZANTINE STATUE

Problems and Questions

Because they were in want of money . . . they covetously eyed the bronze statues and consigned these to the flames. . . . Thus great things were exchanged for small ones, those works fashioned at huge expense were converted into worthless copper coins.¹

Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*

[There] were figures of men and of women, of horses and oxen, and camels, and bears, and lions, and many other kinds of animals, all made of copper, and all so well made and formed so naturally that there is no master workman in Heathendom or in Christendom so skillful as to be able to make figures as good as these. And formerly they used to play by enchantment, but they do not play any longer.²

Robert De Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*

The passages above describe the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 CE. The first was scripted by a prominent Greek intellectual and native of the Byzantine capital;³ the second by a poor Latin knight from Picardy, France.⁴ Both individuals were supposedly eyewitnesses to the shocking events that unfolded during the city's capture. Despite their obvious differences in style, language, and point of view, both accounts evince a common feature: a predilection for the statues that were so prominent a part of the capital and which were brutally destroyed during the sack. That the statues were varied in depiction, startlingly naturalistic, and precious in terms of their material value is evident from the reportage.⁵ Known variously as *stele*, *agalma*, *andrias*, or *eikon* by Greek writers over the centuries,⁶ they dominated the environs in which they stood to a degree impossible to imagine today owing to their

unceremonious disappearance all those years ago. And yet they impressed both the citizen and the invader as inalienable features of the capital of the Romans, so much so that their destruction, for Nicetas Choniates and Robert de Clari, stood for the fall of the empire itself.

The above observation does not accord with the dominant themes of the scholarly literature that, apart from a few exceptions, consistently identifies the holy icon (be it the image of the Theotokos or Christ or the saints) with Byzantium.⁷ The statues have been accorded some attention by literary scholars and historians as richly allusive metaphors in early and Middle Byzantium (especially in the oeuvre of Michael Psellos);⁸ but their actual exemplars are more often than not disregarded. One recent art historical study dismisses them by claiming that “ancient statuary by the Middle Byzantine period had lost its role as commemorative, religious, and votive sculpture. As a result, it had left the stage of narrative and performance.”⁹ How the terms “narrative” and “performance” might have been defined in the period is debatable, as is the term “religious” (on which more later in this section). For now, suffice to say that if such were indeed the case, then it is difficult to see why patriographies, chronicles, novels, and epigrams mention them as enacting various roles with a certain consistency and at critical moments. The statement, however, nicely illustrates the general scholarly attitude toward statues. These are considered to be outliers; objects of magic,¹⁰ illustrative of superstitions at best, or a heap of nonsense at worst, bereft of the lofty values accorded to the images of Christ and the saints.¹¹

This book emphatically negates such a stance and proposes a rather different view and shape of Byzantine art. It contends that the statues of Constantinople constituted an integral and equally important part of the Byzantine visual discourse as Orthodox images, both in terms of being actual objects occupying real space and time and as conceptual markers of prophecy, temporality, and mimesis. In terms of the shape of the discipline, the book suggests that these statues were, at times, regarded as the primary repositories of certain core values above holy icons. In Robert de Clari’s account, for instance, the Orthodox icon of the Greeks that was supposed to save them fails to do so;¹² in Choniates’ report holy images are denied the copious comments reserved for the statues, their splendor, and their subsequent destruction (see Chapter 3). Moreover, the statues were associated with the future of the city, particularly in apocalyptic terms in certain periods, to a degree that holy icons were not (see Chapter 2). As far as weight is concerned, the book argues that statues exceeded their Christian counterparts in size and possibly numbers in public spaces well up to the 10th century at least, if we are to go by written sources. Cyril Mango estimates that more than 100 of them still stood as late as the Middle Byzantine era.¹³ And as Helena Saradi-Mendelovici points out, responses to these statues were multifaceted and endured right up to the fall of

Byzantium, thus attesting to their importance and appeal over centuries.¹⁴ The perception of statuary as a vital part of the Byzantine capital is also articulated in sources from the Islamic world, which describe them as the marvelous components of imperial armature, and/or as ominously prophetic of the future.¹⁵ Forming a bridge between the pagan past and the Christian present, the statues were integrated into Byzantine visual culture at different levels in both overt and implicit modes.

Moreover, recent trends in the scholarship on holy icons and their integration into the public life of the capital further support the above view.¹⁶ Note that I emphasize *icons* vis-à-vis statues. This is because even as churches were built in numbers and became prominent features of the physical landscape of Constantinople with icons adorning their interiors,¹⁷ the place of Christian images in the most important public spaces of that landscape is not as securely attested.¹⁸ Even under as unbendingly Orthodox an emperor as Theodosius I, for instance, the Golden Gate of Constantinople is reported to have had crosses and the *chrismon* on it along with elephants, a statue of Theodosius, the Nike, the Tyche of Constantinople, and flying eagles, but no icons of Christ and others of the Christian pantheon.¹⁹ (Orthodox imagery was certainly present in personal spaces and effects such as rings, seals, bowls, garments, and residences.)²⁰ Whilst other studies have acknowledged the presence and reception of statues in Byzantium (historians rather more than art historians, as discussed in the section, Statue and Sculpture: Previous Scholarship) none have (1) systematically read through genres to discern the coherence with which they advance certain values associated with statuary or (2) integrated them with existing discourses on Orthodox imagery or investigated the possibilities of reframing the latter – particularly the *limits*, rather than the powers, of holy icons – when viewed against the imposing backdrop of the former. This book reads the statuary along with trends in the domain of Christian images to discern the ways in which they inflected, supplemented, and/or competed with each other.

Constantinople had the distinction of being endowed with a massive number of statues brought from other parts of the empire by Emperor Constantine I and, later, by some of his successors.²¹ This act of assembling statues for the foundation of a new capital was on an unprecedented scale and had at least two implications: First, it gathered together pieces from radically different contexts in new assemblages such that venerable cult statues, honorific dedications, and mythological sculptures rubbed shoulders together (the chryselephantine Olympian Zeus placed in Lausus' palace collection is just one example of such stunning reversals of context); second, although such a wholesale act of spoliation attested to the power of the material past in legitimizing and crafting a glorious heritage for the new capital, that past itself was uprooted and distorted in the act of pulling out statues from their original

contexts. This led to a marked degree of flexibility in the use and interpretation of statues: The famous image placed atop Constantine's column, for instance, can be comfortably read as both sun god and Christ precisely because Constantine was "striving to communicate with multiple constituencies using signs that could be understood as affirmations of his sympathy for differing religious perspectives."²² We see a similar pattern (if not perhaps scale) of the removal of ancient sculptures and spolia from the public spaces of the city under the reign of Basil I when he used them to adorn his own commissions. Among these was a statue that he had apparently buried in the foundations of the New Church that he commissioned (*Nea Ekklesia*).²³

The new capital was the only center in the Roman world significantly invested in setting up large numbers of statues well after the habit was dead in other cities.²⁴ R. R. R. Smith's fundamental work on late antique sculpture in the Greek east points squarely to Constantinople's significance in reformulating the external appearance of statues and the new ideologies invested in them.²⁵ Briefly, Smith alerts us to the fact that late antique statues were smaller, fewer in numbers, but distinct entities that stood in their own right, not inserted into the niches and aediculae of other monuments as their earlier counterparts were.²⁶ They were positioned on reused bases with roughly cut inscriptions that give very few indications of the subject's identity, career, or deeds. Smith interprets these trends as reflective of the new political climate in which the "stiff," "hieratic," and "frontal" style of late antique statues played a part (all adjectives also typically used to describe Byzantine art in general, well beyond late antiquity). That climate incorporated similarly stiff, hieratic public postures with an emphasis on frontality, immobility, and stateliness.²⁷ Peter Stewart's study on Roman statues observes that "no portrayal of [the emperor's] public presence could entirely ignore the image of the statue and its connotations. The vocabulary of the statuesque inevitably formed part of the vocabulary of imperial display."²⁸ These points apply well to Byzantium where the favored metaphor for describing the appearance of emperors and bishops both in the early and later eras is a "statue."²⁹ The emperor, in particular, was best seen as "fixed, stable, and unmovable, a ruler whose character and judgement were unswayed by emotional excess."³⁰ These views force us to reassess the longstanding notion that the hieraticism of late antique (and later Byzantine) monuments was the sole cognate of Christian spirituality and, by extension, that the disappearance of statues was a genuflection to the demands of Orthodoxy and its supposed fears regarding the three-dimensional image. Equally important, they impress an understanding of the role of the new capital in ushering in a new sculptural vocabulary, space, and ideology.

More recently, Ine Jacobs and Lea Stirling have stressed the longevity of the statuary tradition, the reuse, appreciation, and placement of statues in domestic and public contexts in sites in Greece and Asia Minor as late as the

6th century CE.³¹ Although Jacobs claims that by the beginning of that century the tradition already belonged to the Roman past,³² at least in Constantinople the statues remained standing and, to judge from Robert de Clari's account (and others), some were not in too bad a condition either.

This book tracks the perceptions and associations invested in statues well into the medieval period. The word "statue" here sustains a broad referential frame. The book gestures to that object (sculpture in the round and in relief) both in its generic and sometimes specific capacities, and to exemplars usually located in Constantinople, but also in other places depending on the context/source at hand. I have not categorized these objects as "imperial," "mythological," "animal," etc., because the sources examined here do not make such categorical distinctions as we modern viewers tend to.³³ To give one example, Nicetas Choniates writes about the statues of Herakles, Helen, an eagle combating a snake, and other themes seamlessly without betraying differences between them based on modern modes of categorization.

It may be argued that since a number of these objects were brought to the capital from elsewhere, they cannot in good conscience be considered "Byzantine," to which contention I offer the following rebuttal: To consider these objects only in terms of their sites of production is far too narrow an interpretative framework. It does injustice to the circumstances of Mediterranean visual culture, as Eva Hoffmann argued.³⁴ Importantly, the sources explored do not indicate that the city's statuary was not a vital part of it materially or historically, even if they recognize that some of the statues came long ago from Rome, Egypt, etc. This attitude may be understood by way of a modern example: In polls conducted post-Brexit, roughly half of the British population surveyed felt that the Elgin marbles belonged to Britain despite knowing full well that they are originally from Greece.³⁵ It should not surprise us that similar sentiments of belonging should have been expressed by Constantinopolitans and others, some of whom had seen statues in their city over centuries. The patriographies trace the history of Constantinople expressly via its statuary; and even staunchly anti-idol chroniclers such as John Malalas and the author of the *Chronicon Paschale* describe the foundation of the capital explicitly with an eye to its statues (and, significantly, not via Christian icons – see Chapter 3); the same goes for Nicetas Choniates, as briefly discussed above. Furthermore, John Ma has demonstrated that a number of these objects arrived in Constantinople without their accompanying bases and, therefore, identifying inscriptions.³⁶ The statues were thus bereft of textual markers, leaving them open to reinterpretation, which, in turn, allowed for a high degree of reappropriation. The mythological statues retained their former identities to a large extent, as we shall see, but civic portrait statues were probably reinscribed in the narratives of the new capital. Even when statues are criticized as pagan "others" to Orthodoxy (as in Constantine of Rhodes' description of the wonders of

Constantinople,³⁷ for instance, or in Choniates), they are still believed to sustain vital connections to the physical shape of the capital and the fortunes of Romania at large. This subtle tension in attitudes is sometimes stretched to the limit and explodes in acts of violence in which a particular image – the Athena in Constantine’s Forum, for instance – is identified as an “enemy of the people” and destroyed. But by and large, the statues are associated firmly with the business of empire and its fate, even when they augur an inauspicious future. These topics are explored in detail in Chapter 2.

This is also a good moment to address the “perennial nut of Hellenism” in Byzantium.³⁸ As Anthony Kaldellis pointed out, the term “Hellenism” is historically unmanageable and encompasses such vast issues as language, ethnicity, culture, art, literature, and identity, among others, not all of which evince the same trajectory.³⁹ Studies have “lumped together speech, literature, *paideia*, rhetoric, philosophy, art, and heresy” under its umbrella. But even where one detects a continuity of so-called Hellenism in practice, that should not be equated to continuity of Hellenism as a chosen *identity*.⁴⁰ In other words, it is dangerous to look at just one body of evidence (say statues), no matter how comprehensive, and to try to detect strands of something as complex and dynamic as Hellenism from it. Simply because this book examines statues, it should not inevitably be expected to function as a study of “Hellenism,” given the points outlined above. Insofar as the reception of some of these statues evinces knowledge of, and a degree of reverence toward, the classical past at certain (but not all) moments, one could perhaps advance these objects as evidence of a certain kind of Hellenism at those precise moments. But one finds similar attitudes even in the reception of Orthodox material culture as, for instance, in Michael Psellos’ comment on the trilingual inscription on a Cross, the Greek part of which he explains as a reflection of the study of nature in which the ancient Greeks excelled, according to him.⁴¹ It is modern attitudes toward statues in Byzantium that would have us yoke them to the concept of Hellenism, whilst no such concerns usually trouble us about the repertoire of Orthodox images even when we trace some of its motifs back to a pre-Christian tradition.

Even when scholars acknowledge the importance of statues, there is a marked reluctance to accept their full implications. To give one example: In an excellent article on the bath house of Emperor Leo VI, Paul Magdalino (who has done much to further our understanding of the Constantinopolitan statues) remarks that, “A bath-house adorned with statues, relief sculptures, and representations of emperor and empress striking secular attitudes amid personified river gods, aquatic scenes in the antique manner, and a selection of animal, bird, and plant life, does not correspond to our idea of the sort of monument that a Byzantine emperor ought to have been commissioning at the beginning of the tenth century – certainly not an emperor who . . . known

as a conventionally pious builder of churches and writer of hymns and homilies.”⁴² Magdalino then argues that the “message of the bath was less secular, and more in tune with traditional conceptions of Christian monarchy.”⁴³ Yet the extant evidence in this case – an ekphrasis by Leo Choiosphaktes – does not mention a single Christian representation. It does, on the other hand, flourish with descriptions of statues on pedestals, relief, and a variety of motifs that may or may not have been executed in the medium of sculpture. These are interpreted by Magdalino as Christian themes, first, on the basis of one allusion in the ekphrasis, and secondly, in terms of the “vast cosmic chorus of praise” it seems to encapsulate, “which would clearly put a Byzantine audience in mind of certain Old Testament texts.”⁴⁴

A Byzantine audience may have interpreted the textual and visual motifs in any number of ways, including the Old Testament one. But we have no solid proof that they definitely *did* see visions of it in the imagery described. On the other hand, we have sufficient evidence regarding spaces in the city that were completely devoid of Christian iconography: the Hippodrome and the Forum of Constantine, to name two. Why is it inconceivable that an imperial bath house may have operated similarly? The fact that we search for Christian connotations, hidden or otherwise, in contexts which manifest none at all is telling about our assumptions regarding Byzantium, its art, and the politics we perceive the empire to advocate for.

In the following chapters, I demonstrate that the statues of Constantinople (and of some other places) both subtly and overtly inflected perceptions of Orthodox and non-Orthodox material culture, and that these can be better understood if we consider them as constituents of a larger whole in which statues held equal, rather than separate or exclusive, ground. In the process, this book also argues that due attention to the statues and their functions can recast our established parameters regarding both Orthodox and non-Orthodox imagery in Byzantium. Christian and non-Christian images were more contiguous and proximate than we imagine. By dint of dominating certain sites where Orthodox rites occurred (such as the Forum of Constantine, explored later in this Chapter and in Chapter 3), the statues would seem to partake of, and bear witness to, the official religion, at least during some moments in their lives. This phenomenon also nuances and complicates our conceptions of the normative Orthodox ritual/procession/icon. Indeed, we find moments in which the incapacity of the sacred image is signaled (see Chapter 3). This gesture should not be misread as indicating irreverence toward, or the disparagement of, holy images; rather, those instances reflect the many complex dimensions that medieval Orthodoxy encompassed in its attitudes toward the mainstay of its material culture, even well after the supposed triumph of the icon after the image controversies of the 8th and 9th centuries. Taking statues seriously enables us to read those attitudes, and a host of artefacts in other

media and spaces, through a more capacious lens. This book reinterprets sites such as the Hippodrome and objects such as columns, an obelisk pedestal, textile fragments, caskets, manuscript illustrations, and luxury tableware to illuminate how their contexts may be reframed when considered in juxtaposition with the material and metaphorical values invested in their monumental sculpted counterparts.

Following from the above, it must be underscored that this study is not a history of the statue in Constantinople as understood in the traditional sense of the term. It does not delineate the fate of specific exemplars over time. This is owing to two reasons: First, crafting such a history would require considerably more space than the confines of one book could accommodate. But more importantly, this study is not interested in statues as a category unto itself. Instead, it seeks to unearth the varied physical and conceptual entanglements evident between statues and other kinds of images (mentioned above) in the late antique and medieval eras. These entanglements highlight the productive points of tension at which prevailing discourses on holy images overlapped, accompanied, supplemented, and/or came into conflict with those relating to pre- and non-Christian statues.

If viewed through the lens of “sacred” and “secular” images, the statues would seem to fall within the latter category. The terms “sacred,” “secular,” “religious,” “non-religious,” “official,” “unofficial,” and “courtly” have been proposed for various categories of Byzantine art, mainly depending on their Christian content or otherwise.⁴⁵ Yet in the last decade and more, scholars of religion have shown that the “sacred” as a concept and practice is applicable within both the religious and non-religious spheres, and even to, and within, secular contexts.⁴⁶ Rather than a substitute or coefficient of religion per se, the sacred is proposed as an “anthropological constant,” a cognitive category that can be used to analyze transformational situations irrespective of their time and place. These observations are especially pertinent to the present study. The evidence analyzed here indicates that pre- and non-Christian statues in Constantinople were regarded as sacred; not “religious” (although what that term meant at different moments in the empire might have changed more than we realize or like to admit), but as set apart, special, and endowed with an overpowering charisma. That they were once the objects of religious veneration was certainly a known fact, at least to some inhabitants of the capital, if not all. Even when written reports condemn them as the errors of the pagan Greeks, the writers of said reports still take the trouble to mention them, and even extoll their powers. This was probably because they retained vestiges of their formidable religious aura from the ancient past. Why else would they continue to be regarded as the augurs and agents of imperial and cosmic transformation, renewal and termination? And why else would they, rather than Christian icons, be perceived to preside at certain historical moments and

undertake critical tasks such as predicting emperors and the end of the empire? Again, the above remarks should not be read as denigrating the importance of Christian imagery in Byzantium. But it is inescapable that at times these were said to have disappointed expectations and/or malfunctioned (see Chapter 3). Similarly, there were specific roles that statues were regarded as being far better equipped to perform, such as in the sphere of prophecy (see Chapter 2).

What did the statues represent and where were they placed? Reports suggest that they were wrought of marble, bronze, and sometimes wood.⁴⁷ They included portrayals of ancient gods and goddesses, mythological beasts and historical characters, emperors, empresses, philosophers, and charioteers, among others.⁴⁸ Some might have shown Christian figures and subjects, but they do not feature in my study owing to the paucity of references, since these probably did not exist in the sheer numbers that their non-Christian counterparts did. Although some of the non-Christian statues were later reinterpreted in a Christian framework, I focus on the sources that evince precisely the opposite tendency: to emphasize their pre-Christian identities and contexts, thereby suggesting a far more complex attitude to the past and its artefacts. Indeed, as Amy Papalexandrou points out, there exist monuments for which “a strictly Christian reinterpretation may seem the most logical explanation . . . but few instances where the evidence in its favor is absolutely explicit,” (emphasis mine) even in later Byzantine structures such as the so-called Church of the “Little Metropolis” in Athens.⁴⁹

To judge from the evidence, the statues were strewn across Constantinople: in the many fora, the public baths, the acropolis, the main street or the Mese, the sporting arena (hippodrome), atop and around gates, and if we are to believe at least one account (the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* explored in Chapter 2), in the Great Church, or Hagia Sophia as well. Even as churches took over the civic landscape, so too did statuary continue to remain an integral part of the furniture of streets and squares, the two trends occurring in tandem rather than as separate phenomena.⁵⁰

In fact, despite the many churches dotting the capital, it is likely that citizens and outsiders saw many more statues in their everyday lives than they did holy icons and relics. Eusebius wrote gloatingly about the humiliation of the grand cult statues of old which were dragged out of their secret enclosures and pitilessly exposed as part of Constantine’s supposed rejection of the previous dispensation (explored in the section, Potent Combinations: Statues and Relics). Even if we take Eusebius with a pinch of salt, it is probably true that statues were stripped of the cultic paraphernalia that once reserved them strictly for initiates. But, as John Curran reminds us, this did not necessarily rob them of the capacity to assume quasi-religious powers in the eyes of viewers; part of the unpredictability of statues (especially those of ancient origins) was that they could exercise their charisma and become animate anywhere, regardless of



1.1. Reliquary in the shape of a sarcophagus, 400–600 CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Photo: Open Access, image in the public domain

formal sacrifices or specific settings.⁵¹ It is undeniable, however, that Christian relics and images were subject to careful shrouding, layering, and intermittent or complete concealment behind veils and/or in caskets, much as the cult statues once were, as seen in the simple marble reliquary now in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 1.1).

The hole on the top of the reliquary permitted the faithful to insert rods wrapped in cloths inside as a means of accessing the relic's grace. The irony is that such strategies of sanctification made Christian artefacts relatively inaccessible to the public. Jaś Elsner has rightly called attention to the “increased and complex spatial interiority . . . characteristic of both the Byzantine reliquary and the icon.”⁵² Images of relics invariably portray the caskets in which they were stored rather than the remains themselves, thus underscoring the essential hiddenness of the latter (Fig. 1.2). By virtue of their *being made to be invisible*, these have been appropriately termed “absconding” items.⁵³ Similarly, veils were precious objects which controlled visual and tactile access to the images they concealed and disclosed at strategic moments.⁵⁴ Yet, as we shall see later in this chapter, relics rather than icons were associated with statues in late antique Constantinople and were regarded as a particularly powerful combination. The statue furnished the visible face of this confection.