

A Heretical (Orthodox) History of the Parthenon

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What happened to Athens and to the Parthenon in particular during the millennium that separated late antiquity from the advent of the first European travelers and antiquarians in early modern times, so roughly from 500 to 1450? It is well known that the temple was converted into a church of the Theotokos, the Mother of God, but the city, once the cultural and political capital of the Greek world, is believed to have become a provincial backwater in Byzantine times, a place of no importance, certainly not religious. Many surveys assert that there is simply no evidence by which to write a history of them during this period, and so we are presented with the familiar “gap,” as the narrative jumps from the end of antiquity – the closing of the philosophical schools by Justinian in 529 AD – to the first European witnesses, who were in the process of reviving an interest in classical antiquity in the Renaissance. At this point the belief in the absence of evidence (a false belief as we will see) is coupled with another narrative about the relationship between Byzantium and classical antiquity, a narrative that, as we will see, is highly problematical and basically serves ideological purposes.

For example, Ken Setton, who wrote much of what we know about medieval Athens, stated that: “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.” Power and cultural vitality had passed to other centers, like Constantinople. As I mentioned, this bleak picture works together with another narrative about Byzantium’s relation to classical antiquity. Cyril Mango declared that “the Byzantines did not

evince the slightest interest in what we understand by classical Greece." Mango was echoing a long-standing tradition, which continues to flourish. "It is striking," we are told in studies of travel literature, "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." Or, 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." These statements are all false, both the facts that they assert and, consequently, the general interpretations that rest on them.

During the course of my research on the topic of Hellenism in Byzantium, I had to read through many obscure and untranslated texts. One of the things I was looking for was Athens, by which I mean Byzantine views of *ancient* Athens, because I did not expect to find any evidence for contemporary Athens. I began to find some odd exceptions to this, which turned out to be quite extraordinary when looked at closely. But these exceptions began to pile up and then became a torrent when I reached the twelfth century. My original idea of writing an article was now hopeless; there was simply too much. As a result, my thinking about some rather fundamental aspects of Byzantine culture, and about its relation to antiquity and the modern world, have also changed. At the same time, I have had to face some hard conclusions about scholarship on Byzantium and about the ideologies that shape it. After all, this is the Parthenon and Athens we are talking about, not *insignificant* topics. Given the abundance of evidence for their medieval history, one would expect a scholarly industry to be devoted to them. Instead, there are but two survey articles, which are unaware of some 90% of this evidence.

In a nutshell, I found evidence that in the middle Byzantine period many Christians traveled to the Athens for the explicit and sole purpose of praying in the Parthenon, beginning in the eighth century. These included saints Stephanos

of Sougdaia, Loukas of Steiris (the famous Hosios Loukas), Nikon “Metanoeite!”, and Meletios the Younger, along others, and some who were not saints (such as Saewulf, the Anglo-Saxon pilgrim). At least one emperor, Basileios II, went far out of his way to pay his respects to the Mother of God at Athens, while in the twelfth century we have evidence that the shrine was visited by lords and ladies from Constantinople and of a Byzantine governor of Greece who wanted to tax the city in violation of an imperial order that he should stay out of Athens, so he claimed as a pretext that he wanted to worship at the Parthenon. In that century, moreover, the bishops of the city were learned men who corresponded with the Hellenists in the capital. This correspondence generated many texts extolling the fame, glory, and miraculous “light” of the Christian Parthenon, by the likes of Georgios Tornikes, Eustathios of Thessalonike, Euthymios Malakes, Makrembolites, and Michael Choniates, who was bishop of the city before the Crusaders seized it in 1205. Choniates’ collected works reveal that the Parthenon could take on a deep personal and existential importance. All this, and some other evidence I have not yet mentioned, prove that the Parthenon was one of the most important sites of Christian pilgrimage in Byzantium; I would place it fourth after Constantinople, Ephesos, and Thessalonike. Moreover, there is now every reason to think that it was far more important as a church in Byzantium than it had ever been as a temple in antiquity -- or whatever it had been exactly in antiquity to begin with: its precise religious use is a matter of controversy.

Let us look at some of this evidence in more detail.

It is also around 600 that funerary inscriptions, which the first Athenian Christians had set up in cemeteries around the Akropolis and also on top, began to be carved directly onto the columns of their new cathedral. Most of these are by clerics and officials of the Church of Athens, including many of the bishops themselves, and give precise dates for their deaths. Others are prayers carved by named persons, both pilgrims to the site and locals. Altogether, some 220 survive for the years 600-1200, though many more have probably been lost through both

structural damage to the building and erosion to its surface. Similar inscriptions were carved on the surfaces of the Propylaia by visitors walking up to or down from the Akropolis, as well as on the church of St. Georgios by the Kerameikos (in antiquity a temple to Hephaistos, and today known as the Theseion). At the least, this reflects a desire on the part of hundreds of Byzantines to associate their names with these ancient monuments. One case merits special attention. In 848, Leon, the governor of the Byzantine province of Greece, was buried probably in the Parthenon, near which his marble tombstone was found, and had an epitaph inscribed on one of the columns. This makes the Parthenon one of the most heavily inscribed monuments in Byzantium, a vast ledger of pilgrims and clergy.

In 1018, the emperor Basileios II, went on a pilgrimage to Athens directly after his final victory over the Bulgarians for the sole purpose of worshipping at the Parthenon. He then returned to the north and staged a triumphal procession to Hagia Sophia in the capital the following year. Our account of this unusual event, by the historian Ioannes Skylitzes, suggests that the emperor perceived Athens as the special site of reverence of the Mother of God, not Constantinople, which had traditionally held that honor. Moreover, it is hard, if not impossible, to find in the record another instance of a Byzantine emperor traveling so far out of his way on pilgrimage to a holy site. No other interpretation of his action (e.g., political or strategic) makes any sense in context.

Skylitzes' account deserves a closer look, because, despite being brief, it manages to allude to the opening verses of the Akathistos Hymn, the most famous hymn in the Orthodox tradition (the emperor "gave thanks for his victory to the Mother of God" alludes directly to the Akathistos' invocation). This is significant because the Akathistos is actually bitterly anti-Athenian. It was written in the fifth or sixth century, when the Church was still struggling against pagan philosophers, both the traditions of ancient Athens and the Neoplatonists who put their stamp on contemporary, late Roman Athens. There are verses in it that condemn the sophists and philosophers of Athens in the name of the new

faith. So what we have here is the complete reversal of this polarity: Athens is now the home of the most prestigious shrine of the Mother of God; it stands at the pinnacle of Byzantine piety. This has far-reaching implications. For the “city” mentioned at the beginning of the Akathistos is Constantinople, which many regarded as the Virgin’s favored city. But for Basileios, at least, that position was held by Athens. Athens as for him the Parthenos’ special city, not the capital. We note again that in Skylitzes’ account, the emperor prays to the Mother of God in Athens and then to “God” in Hagia Sophia in the capital. By associating Athens with the Akathistos, Skylitzes suggests that the city had been redeemed from the time of the hymn’s original composition, more than redeemed in fact.

The apogee of the Christian Parthenon in Byzantium was in the twelfth century (but this may be due to the survival of more evidence from then than from previous periods). We hear of a festival –probably annual -- celebrated in honor of the Theotokos that drew people to Athens from far and wide, and also of a miracle of divine light inside the Parthenon, probably a lamp whose flame never died. The orators of the period who wrote about Athenian affairs played rhetorically on this theme of the divine light, varying its imagery and drawing into it the famous light of the Attic sky, the bright color of the building itself, the shining virtues of the city’s learned bishops in this period, and so on. The reason that we have these texts is that in the second half of that century the Church of Athens was governed by bishops who had been educated in the capital and kept up their connections to former colleagues and friends. Choniates, for example, lamented the decline of the city from its ancient glory, but also frequently noted that his chief and possible only consolation was the temple of the Mother of God, a divine building, standing next to which he felt as though he was walking on the edge of heaven. He produced many statements to this effect, and there is no reason to quote them here. What is significant about them, and about many of the hagiographical accounts of pilgrimage to the Parthenon, is the emphasis that they place *on the building itself* rather than on the person revered there, which is

what we would expect given the norms of Byzantine piety. It is very odd that Choniates can say that his consolation is the *Parthenon* rather than the Parthenos herself. There was something strange going on with this building.

There is also evidence that the shrine of the Theotokos Atheniotissa – for so she began to be called in the twelfth century, her special “brand name” – was famous far outside of Greece. Both Constantinopolitan and provincial sources take it for granted that readers knew exactly what “church of the Theotokos” was being referred to each time; they often call it famous, and by not explaining what they were talking about, prove that it was in fact famous. But the brand name was “franchised” in the twelfth century. We have evidence that a monastery was founded in the Atheniotissa’s honor in Asia Minor, as was the cathedral church of Alania in the Caucasus (its precise location is unknown). And there is more evidence from the later Christian period, which we need not go into at length. From 1205 to 1456, Athens was ruled by Burgundians, Catalans, Florentines, and, briefly, Venetians. The Parthenon was accorded great honor by them too. In the late thirteenth century, pope Nicolaus IV granted an indulgence for those who went on pilgrimage to it; in 1394, the Florentine duke Nerio Acciaiuoli willed the entire city of Athens *to* the Parthenon as an bequest and asked that he be buried in it. The first term, at least, was not put into effect. The stream of pilgrims continued as during Byzantine times, and only gradually and by degrees turned into the “western traveler,” whose antiquarian curiosity (as opposed to Christian reverence) marks the “modern period.”

So Byzantine Athens and the Parthenon have a history after all, a very well documented one in fact, though it has never been studied. This allows us to challenge the broader conclusions that have been drawn about the relationship between Byzantium and classical antiquity. It is debatable whether anyone can live among ancient ruins and not be interested in them, or not tell stories, however fantastical, about them. Scattered hints in our sources indicate that the Byzantine inhabitants of the ancient cities did take note and sometimes pride in

their ruins, which in some places became tourist sights, for instance at Kyzikos, which seems to have been a major tourist attraction. And Athens, as we have seen, was a category unto itself. There is in fact evidence of a tourist “trade” in Byzantine Athens. The city was, after all, not merely filled with the ruins of ancient temples, baths, houses, and stoas, but in many cases directly built on top of them, partly reusing their walls, their pillars, and their tombs. Names were invented and probably stories too in order to “explain” monuments to visiting dignitaries, such as bishops, governors, and imperial emissaries. The victory monument of Lysikrates had been renamed the Lantern of Demosthenes by the late twelfth century; we see here not merely the need to understand, but to link monuments to famous ancient figures. And then there was the Parthenon.

The Parthenon was the dominant symbol of Byzantine Athens, in most of our texts the city’s chief attraction. Of course, this Parthenon was a church, and some even tried to pretend that it was only a church, that all the fuss about it was only the honor due to the Mother of God, the true *Parthenos* who had replaced the *false* virgin Athena. But there was more going on beneath the surface. First, we have to remember that the building had hardly been altered in its conversion from temple to church. Even the pediments were left more or less intact. So it did not look at all like any Byzantine church in honor of the Mother of God. Standing on the Akropolis, surrounded both there and in the city below by so many other ancient buildings that had also not been changed much, the Byzantine visitor was transported to another time. He knew that, or felt it, but he could choose to ignore it. The idea in many of our texts, that this was just another church of the Mother of God, fails to persuade, and is often asserted with defensiveness enough that it raises suspicion. What’s curious about many of our accounts is that they focus on *the building itself*, which is highly unusual, if not aberrant, considering the norms of Byzantine piety and pilgrimage. Normally, one was drawn to the relics or the icons or the saint in a more abstract sense, but here there were none of those things: all attention was on the temple, the building itself (only in the

case of Hagia Sophia do we have something similar, though it is different in its own way). Amidst the ruins of Athens and the collapse of his state, Choniates took solace in his cathedral and less in the holy person honored there; perhaps he did not even notice how odd that sounded.

We need not doubt the sincerity of Byzantine pilgrims to the Parthenon, who did believe they were paying homage there to the Mother of God. But we cannot explain their behavior, and by extension the Parthenon's popularity in those times, without considering an unspoken supplement to their own accounts, something that they preferred not to talk about but without which their actions are inexplicable. We cannot put our finger on precisely what this was, because they did not talk about it, but it had something to do with the temple's classical pedigree. It was precisely this that they could not express in Christian terms, and so they preferred not to try. A minority among our writers, however, did try to put it into words, or at least nod in its direction. A few suggested that the ancient Athenians had, in their wisdom, foreseen that the Parthenon would one day be dedicated to the Virgin and so (temporarily) gave it to Athena. This goes back in some form to an oracle that was devised in late antiquity, around 500 AD and the time of the temple's conversion (later preserved in the collection known as the *Tübingen Theosophy*), according to which Apollo himself had predicted that the temple would be reconsecrated to Maria. At the time, this had surely smoothed the transition and probably also justified the lack of alteration to the building. For his part, Choniates was always talking about the ancient Athenians in his sermons, exhorting his flock to imitate and surpass (as Christians) the virtues of their noble ancestors. A classical scholar in his own right, he knew the facts about his cathedral's history.

In this way, two histories were fashioned for the Byzantine Parthenon: one that stressed discontinuity, the triumph of the new faith over the old, of the true *Parthenos* over the false *daimon* of the Greeks; and another that made sense of the all-too-obvious continuity from classical antiquity. There is every reason to think

that the Athenians of Choniates' time were proud of their city largely because of its ancient history – it had hardly any Christian credentials to speak of – and that they were pleased when visiting dignitaries from Constantinople, many of them classically educated, were curious about their monuments and asked after this or that site they had read about in Demosthenes or Plato. We also know that they were given “the tour.” So these two interpretations stood side-by-side; the one stepped in when the other failed, and vice versa. I suspect that this was in part why the Parthenon became so popular: its custodians shrewdly gave out mixed signals, encouraging visitors to draw whatever conclusion pleased them about this very strange church, the likes of which they had perhaps not seen anywhere else. In this way, the site was honored by a fundamentalist missionary preaching repentance (Nikon) as well as by the Constantinopolitan professors of classics and rhetoric who were appointed to serve as its bishops or were just visiting.

Byzantium, it turns out, was not exactly what we thought it was. In some ways classical antiquity lay at its heart, though wrapped up in so many layers of meaning – and hidden away in so many untranslated texts – that it is not easy to say at first sight “what the Byzantines thought of the ancient world.” There was as much subtle psychology at work here as doctrinal theology, and also classical philology. The “divine light” that first makes its appearance in our sources about 1100 AD seems to have been, in the first instance, cast by an ever-burning lamp and then turned into a literary theme by the orators. But this lamp was probably a Byzantine invention inspired by Pausanias, who was being read widely at that time. Pausanias, in the second century AD, says that the temple of Athena Polis on the Akropolis (probably the Erechtheion) had such a lamp. It is likely that the custodians of the Byzantine Parthenon reinforced the link between antiquity and their cathedral by endowing it with such a miracle – no matter that it confused the two temples. “Light” is neutral between pagan and Christian and can serve as a bridge between them, just as did the Parthenon itself.

Conversely, some of the psychological reactions that historians routinely used to ascribe to the Byzantines are actually entirely absent from our evidence for Athens in this period, for instance the terror of demons that were allegedly believed to inhabit pagan statues and temples. In some respects, this is another mode of Orientalist discourse, for being superstitious in this way basically sets one outside the boundaries of modernity and precludes one from having voice in modern debates about the meaning of the past. Yet there is no evidence that the Byzantine Athenians feared demons, even though they lived amidst the ruins of a pagan city notoriously said in Acts of the Apostles to be full of idols. Its bishops actually lived in the Propylaia and performed the liturgy in a former temple of Athena, looking directly at the spot where her statue had been riveted to the floor.

Obviously, more is at stake in all this than a few misunderstandings about Byzantium: the entire history of the Parthenon has to be rewritten. I am referring specifically to the ancient-modern polarity, according to which the Parthenon was a glorious temple that celebrated all that was good about classical antiquity (democracy, philosophy, humanism, etc.); it was then neglected by the benighted Byzantines, who were superstitious Christians, and effectively had no history for over a thousand years, only then to have its true worth “discovered” in modern times with the birth of the nation and the emergence of scientific scholarship and archaeology.

Our (heretical / orthodox) alternative to this alleged history has a different geometry. First, we have to acknowledge that the Parthenon was not regarded in antiquity as anything so special. Few of the extraordinary things that have been said about it in modern times are even so much as hinted at in ancient sources, and when they are they do not refer to the Parthenon exclusively. The building was never placed on the list of ancient “wonders.” There were too many far more magnificent structures in the lands around the Mediterranean that contended for that honor, though they were later destroyed and so no longer pose a challenge.

As far as we can tell, the Parthenon was never associated with any ideal, whether democracy (it only happened to be built by one, but could have been built just as well by a tyrant), philosophy, humanism, or what not. Unlike in Byzantium, we know of no one in antiquity who traveled to Athens to see it or pray in it. It was not even an especially important religious site in the classical age, and seems to have been used as a treasury.

No ancient source that talks about the “sights” of Athens singles out the Parthenon among the many other sights. Demosthenes lists among those glories the Propylaia, the Parthenon, the Stoa, and the ship-sheds of the Peiraieus. The Hellenistic travel-writer Herakleides lists it among other attractions such as the theater, the unfinished Olympieion, and the Academy. Livius tells us that on his tour of Greece the victorious general Titus Flamininus saw the Akropolis, the harbor, the Long Walls, the docks, the monuments of generals, and the statues of gods and men. In his account of the Periklean “building-program,” Plutarch in fact pays less attention to the Parthenon than to most of the other projects (even though some historians, influenced by Parthenolatry, think that he is basically talking about the Parthenon). In fact, not only was the building not associated with any ideal; not only did it not seem more important than half a dozen or a dozen other buildings in Athens; it also seems that when attention *was* focused on it this was directed exclusively at the gold-and-ivory statue of Athena inside, the one made by Pheidias. We see this priority in the account of the Parthenon by the second-century AD travel-writer Pausanias, who pays no attention to the architecture and the friezes (we give all our attention to the architecture and the friezes).

The Parthenon, it seems, was a more important and revered monument in Byzantium than it was in antiquity. Only then did it elicit religious enthusiasm; only then was it associated with a “divine light,” a theme that would continue through the Latin period and on to the early travelers, to finally climax in the outpourings of literary light-worship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. So it is possible that we owe to the Byzantines not merely the survival of the monument itself but also the devotion to it that has been secularized and aestheticized in our times. Again, the story's polarity has been reversed. Modern classicism present itself as a return to pure ancient ideals and an overcoming of medieval superstition and barbarism, but it is found, at least in this case, to be a secular extension of Byzantine piety.

After all, it was a tense dynamic between antiquity and "modernity" that made the Byzantine Parthenon possible in the first place. Choniates anguished over whether his flock would ever attain the virtue of their ancient ancestors. In his *Inaugural Address* to the Athenians, delivered in the Parthenon, he attempted to define the moral, historical, and religious relationship between the two world-views. It is to this address, and not to anything from antiquity, that the speech of welcome for king Otto of Greece delivered in German in the Parthenon by Leo von Klenze six and a half centuries later (1834), is more interestingly compared. The modern orator also took as his theme the relationship between ancients and moderns, but his triumphal nationalist idea was vastly less humble, subtle, and beautiful than the oration of his Byzantine predecessor on that very site ("all the remains of barbarity will be removed. . . the remains of the glorious past will be brought in a new light," etc.).

Choniates had posed a series of tough questions to his audience and had urged them to think hard (to his dismay they did not, he later admitted). For him the Parthenon was a challenge, almost a standing reproach against the decadence of his times. But modern ideologies, from von Klenze onward, deploy a different pedagogy. They enlist the Parthenon in their projects and force it to speak their words. Its history has been rewritten to serve modern needs. The archaeologists of the new state systematically purified the site of any vestige and memory of its post-classical history, including those of Byzantium, though what they restored, what the modern tourist sees today, was a fantasy of their devising. At any rate, they ensured that no one could look at the Parthenon and say, "This was once a

church of the Theotokos, one of the most famous in the orthodox world.' And yet it was that, for a thousand years.

The point is not merely that the history of the middle centuries can and should be written. When we do so we realize that the ancient-modern polarity promotes specific ideologies under these false guises: it appropriates classical antiquity for the modern West, excluding the Byzantine and Ottoman "Orient" from the picture; and promotes the modern Greek state's desired link between modern and ancient Hellenism in a way that writes both into the history of the West. It is also designed to exclude religious interpretations specifically of the Parthenon, whether pagan, Christian, or Islamic, in order to clear the way for modern aesthetic, national, psychological, or literary ideals -- all secular. That they so often soar to the heights of pious rapture is possible only because there is no viable religious alternative to expose their rhetorical and dream-like quality. In short, it is not just a matter of "filling in the facts," which can be done, but of rewriting the grand narrative of what such a building as the Parthenon *means*.

At any rate, this secret is now out: the Parthenon is no longer strictly an ancient monument. Many books and articles are now devoted to the meanings that it has accumulated in the past two hundred years, meanings that bear little relation to whatever those who built it had in mind. It has been a symbol for the rebirth of the Greek nation; of its continuity with ancient Greece; an inspiration for neoclassicism and a whole range of other modern artistic, architectural, and literary movements. It has stood for both the universal Hellenism of philosophy and art that builds bridges between Greece and the West as well as for the local, particular identity of the Greeks that asserts itself against outsiders. It has been a stage for dancers, for advertisements, and the design of automobiles. Most of this has little to do with antiquity, and has been ably studied by scholars who are not classicists.

In the 1830s, Athens was so small, poor, and ravaged by a decade of war and sieges, that Christopher Wordsworth could say that there was effectively no

modern town to distract the visitor from communing immaculately and directly with the antiquities that lay at its heart. Almost two centuries later, the modern city sprawls unrelentingly from foothill to foothill, resembling a vast barbarian hoard laying permanent siege to the beleaguered citadel. The now consolidated archaeological park in the center is like a black hole of alien memory, its meaning increasingly elusive and uncertain. So much has been forced upon the Parthenon that it has become almost a pure sign, a sign that refers only to itself. Arguably, it is now more famous than any idea, ideology, policy, person, or product to which it has been made to point in the last two hundred years. Certainly, new meanings will be invented for it as times change and new needs arise; it is too convenient a symbol to be allowed its rest. Nor should we expect the weird world that we are entering to show any respect for historical truth. Yet there will always be those who are interested in such things as are omitted from the dominant narratives of our time.

Professor Kaldellis has written many books and articles on Byzantine cultural and intellectual history. His two current projects include *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*; and *The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Medieval Athens*, both forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

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