

Byzantine Research Project: March 2010

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1. Thesis / Hypothesis

In the early years of the Byzantine Empire, art of this newly “formed” culture was mostly religious in nature and carefully captured icons and religious paintings were an important way to connect the human being with the divine.

2. Sources / Limitations of Study

a. Primary and secondary

Many copies of paintings have been included, and although few written primary sources were found on this topic, those that were located were included. Many secondary sources have been used to analyze themes, continuities and consistencies in Byzantine art during the time period looked at. Some sources are current (1980s and on), while others are older (early 1900s) so that some awareness of the continuity of historical research was gained. See list of sources under endnotes section and images throughout document for further citation.

b. Perspectives

This study looks only at the first 3-4 centuries of the Byzantine Empire, and focuses largely on the period during which Constantine was emperor. This focus was adopted as “early Byzantine art is particularly interesting, [since] it played a definitive role in the development of artistic creation throughout the whole of Byzantium.”ⁱ

c. Awareness of perspectives not taken

Periods other than the one indicated are not looked at; therefore, continuity or change over the duration of the entire empire has not been examined. Even within the centuries studied, most research was directed at the period of Constantine. Other imperial influences were not considered.

In addition, all images are not from only the fourth century. However, all images, even those made during later time periods, show a continuation of what ideas were birthed in the first centuries of the Byzantine Empire.

3. Argument / Discussion / Evidence

Through what has typically been known as the Dark Ages, there was a flourishing empire being born via the Romans. Extraordinary works of art were produced during this time.ⁱⁱ The Byzantine culture was influenced by ancient Greek culture, which had become a feature of Roman society as well. The first few centuries of Byzantine art are especially indicative and explain very well the themes and artistic endeavors of subsequent centuries. The fusion of

Greek/Roman and Christian culture during these first formative years of the empire was well represented and documented in the art of this time period.ⁱⁱⁱ

Art in the Byzantine Empire was valued; artisans and architects were well paid and esteemed in this culture.^{iv} Though Giorgio Vasari put forth a negative interpretation of the Byzantine art in 1550, most believe that Byzantine art was a vibrant cultural staple that contributed very positively to the culture as a whole.^v They valued all types of art, including using architecture and buildings as a way to express themselves artistically. There were many bronze and marble statues and sculptures in the highly-decorated capital of Constantinople.^{vi}



Image: Image of sculpture of Constantine, showing decoration of capital of Constantinople.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/byzantium/images.html#ex1>

The churches in the Byzantine Empire were painted inside and out; they were well-decorated masterpieces that were themselves snapshots of the current

culture and its values.^{vii} Images of Christ and other Biblical figures, as well as Biblical stories, adorned the ceilings and walls of Constantinople's churches.^{viii} The church and its decoration was so important because the Byzantines believed that the purpose of worship was the divinization of humanity. For this reason, the art inside a church was very important, as art connected the human with the divine realm; images, wall paintings, mosaics, altar furnishings, books and icons were all found within churches to help saints achieve this connection with the celestial realm.^{ix} John of Damascus wrote on the value of this icon-worship in his writing "On Holy Images" during a later century of the Byzantine Empire.^x

The focus of this paper, however, will be more directed at how the Byzantines perceived painted art and went about designing and creating religious portraits or paintings. Much of Byzantine art focused on symbolic meaning, though they valued capturing things as accurately as possible. There were many, many paintings of religious saints and patriarchs, and of course of Jesus Christ himself.^{xi} In addition to paintings of these people, the Byzantines depicted Biblical stories and created rings and seals with religious figures emblazoned on them.^{xii}



Image of "Christ in the Heavenly Jerusalem," showing depiction of Christ and Biblical stories.

<http://thoughtline.com/byznet/chj.htm>

For Byzantines, the depiction of religious icons was a large part of their artistic culture. "According to Eusebius of Caesarea painted icons of Christ, St Peter, and St Paul were widespread in the early fourth century."^{xiii} The significance of religion to this culture cannot be denied. All Byzantines knew the Bible and religion was one of the common features that defined Byzantium; it was the peoples' common identity.^{xiv} "In middle and later Byzantine art the Old Testament is chiefly represent by the single figures of prophets or priests."^{xv} These religious or holy "eikons" were prayed to, and often served as a link between this world and the next. Vast resources were poured into the creation of these icons^{xvi} and the tradition of paintings and images serving as a window into

the next world has persisted throughout history.^{xvii} These “eikons” adorned homes and churches alike.

Though painting and depicting religious figures and stories was popular, there were spoken and unspoken rules, regulatory thoughts and processes that sometimes remain hidden to the unenlightened viewer. Some of the common spoken and unspoken regulations surrounding the art of the Byzantine culture are identified below.

With respect to all aspects of Byzantine culture, it cannot be denied that the birth of Jesus marked a turning point in their history. As many of the Romans of Constantinople were reborn into Christianity, so was art reborn during this period. Jesus Christ became a focal point of much of their art.^{xviii} With the Christian focus came a reverence for all things Biblical and supernatural. The Byzantines were artistically sensitive to the importance of capturing a true likeness of whomever or whatever they were painting. It was considered pagan to paint a portrait of Jesus Christ, for example, as one could never truly capture the religious icon as he truly was.^{xix} Painting Christ was considered a violation of the Ten Commandments for many; they agreed that it must not be attempted “lest we appear to carry our God around in an image.”^{xx} For many, the only real religious icon could be the Eucharist (blood and body of Christ). Nevertheless, many disregarded this thought and painted portraits of Christ right alongside portraits of patriarchs and Mary the mother of Jesus.^{xxi}

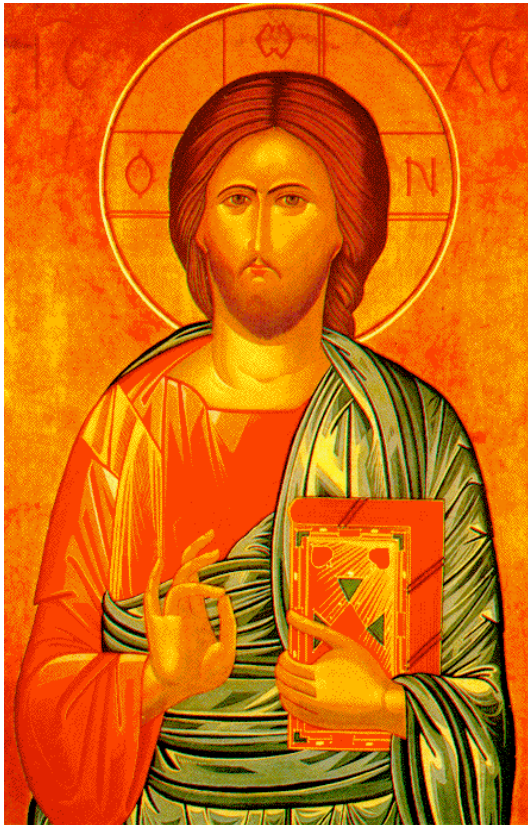


Image: “Jesus Christ,” illustrating depiction of Christ.

The painting of saints and patriarchs, on the other hand was encouraged, as one could actually capture a true likeness of the person.^{xxii} Naturally, religious imagery became associated with imperial imagery as well; by the seventh century, Christ and the emperor shared opposite faces of the same coin.^{xxiii}



Image: "The Virgin of Vladimir," illustrating the importance religious icons played in paintings.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/byzantium/images.html#ex1>



Image: "St. Philip the Apostle," illustrating depiction of religious patriarchs and saints.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/byzantium/images.html#ex1>



Image (above): "St. Gregory Palamas," an image of a saint from the Byzantine era.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/byzantium/images.html#ex1>



Byzantines also illustrated and illuminated Biblical texts, often depicting Biblical scenes through mosaics created for churches.^{xxiv}

Image: Corner of an icon of Christ's being taken down from the cross, showing illustration of Biblical stories.

<http://www.mit.edu:8001/afs/athena.mit.edu/activity/o/ocf/www/icons.html>

4. Relation / Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

We can see where our reverence for the sacred image has developed from. We can also see where painting a narrative scene has come from. The Byzantines were original storytellers. Stained glass, church paintings and tapestries can be traced to Byzantine religious icons. As Robert Byron said, the Byzantines were the first to not merely represent through art, but to actually interpret through art.^{xxv}

5. Conclusions

Byzantine art was not focused around the secular image, but instead focused on religious icons and paintings. In the early period, the Byzantines painted images that were used to connect themselves (humanity) to God (divine). There were regulations surrounding the painting of images; for example, paintings of Christ were somewhat frowned upon because one could never capture his true likeness.

6. Endnotes

ⁱ *Early Byzantine Period*. Eurobank EFG, 2009. Web. 25 Feb. 2010.
<<http://www.fhw.gr/chronos/08/en/index.html>>

ⁱⁱ *Art of Eternity*. Narr. Andrew Graham-Dixon. BBC Four, 2007. Film.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Early Byzantine Period*. Eurobank EFG, 2009. Web. 25 Feb. 2010.
<<http://www.fhw.gr/chronos/08/en/index.html>>

^{iv} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 14.

^v Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 2.

^{vi} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 10.

^{vii} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 33.

^{viii} Lowden, John. *Early Christian and Byzantine Art: Art & Ideas*. N.p.: Phaidon Press, 1997.

^{ix} Safran, Linda. *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 4.

^x John of Damascus, *On Holy Images*, Paul Halsall, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/psellus-chron00.html>, January 1999.

^{xi} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 16.

^{xii} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 34, 39.

^{xiii} Lowden, John. *Early Christian and Byzantine Art: Art & Ideas*. N.p.: Phaidon Press, 1997.

^{xiv} Safran, Linda. *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 3.

^{xv} Dalton, Ormonde M. *Byzantine art and archaeology*. Princeton: Clarendon Press, 1911

^{xvi} Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 2.

^{xvii} *Art of Eternity*. Narr. Andrew Graham-Dixon. BBC Four, 2007. Film.

^{xviii} Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 1.

^{xix} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 16.

^{xx} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 17, 18.

^{xxi} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 16.

^{xxii} Mango, Cyril. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 40.

^{xxiii} Safran, Linda. *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 5.

^{xxiv} *Interreligious Insight*. Ed. Alan Race, Seshagiri Rao, and Jim Kenney. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.interreligiousinsight.org/About.html>>.

^{xxv} Byron, Robert. *The birth of western painting*. New York: George Routledge, 1930, pp. 25.

7. Appedices

Appendix 1:

Image: Map of Byzantium, c. 565 AD. From

http://byzantium.seashell.net.nz/articlemain.php?artid=mapbase_565

