

## Art and Society in Late Antiquity

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ANY HISTORIAN who comes to speak on art and society in late antiquity is likely to find himself in the position of a general who has advanced impetuously too far ahead of his troops. For the relation between the study of Late Antique art and the writing of Late Antique history is a peculiar one. The Late Antique period has come to interest us primarily by reason of the puzzling quality of Late Antique civilization. Between A.D. 300 and 600, within the relatively stable social and political environment of the late Roman Empire, one form of civilization, with which we have tended to identify ourselves wholeheartedly--the civilization of the classical ancient world--was replaced by something disturbingly different.

The charge of having declined through having departed from the ideal of classical antiquity rests heavily on the Late Antique period. To rebut such a charge, the historian has been forced to face up to the problem of the nature of change in a traditional civilization. He has had to develop an insight into the aims and the positive achievements of a culture plainly different from that of the classical world, and yet so plainly continuous with it as to be open to frequent invidious comparisons with a supposedly "superior" predecessor. He has to make intelligible and to communicate without the rhetoric of "decline and fall" the process by which a civilization as seemingly complete in itself as that of classical antiquity changed into the impenitently postclassical world of late antiquity.

Consideration of Late Antique art has played a quite outstanding role in the reassessment that has enabled us to treat late antiquity as a period in its own right. The art historians of this century have elaborated clear and dispassionate criteria with which to judge the artistic changes of the postclassical world, and they have not hesitated to bring into their assessment of Late Antique art a willingness shared by cultivated men of our century to look with more tolerant eyes on the nonclassical and the exotic.

Thus, on the crucial issue of the quality of Late Antique civilization and the nature and pace of the changes by which it became so different from its classical predecessor, the history of Late Antique art has come to be the arbiter of elegance. We have learned to expect that any study of the culture and society of the period that wishes to claim to be something more than a useful contribution to erudition must, in some way, reflect the ability to seek out meaningful criteria, to sense the complexity of the processes by which one style changes into another, and, above all, to treat divergences from classical norms with serenity of judgment. This kind of judgment has been the hallmark of a small, but distinguished, band of historians of Late Antique art in Europe and America.

If we turn, therefore, to the work of a master of such scholarship, the late Henri Irene Marrow we meet an author whose vivid eye and unflinching sensitivity to the quality of change within a continuous tradition gave warmth and a concrete "presence" to even the most dry and seemingly remote products of the late classical schoolroom. Marrow's work was marked throughout by a willingness to allow the art of the age to speak loudly and clearly about the changes that he could trace with such *finesse* in other areas. Those who have found in the *Retractatio* to his *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, first published in 1949, a new starting point for their own meditations on what was really happening in the period after A.D. 300, will remember the long passage with which he concluded his plea to regard late antiquity as a period in its own right, rather than as an age of "decadence," or as a rarefied harbinger of the Middle Ages.

Let us take the most concrete case: the plastic arts. Look at the great bronze head of Constantius 11 in the Museo dei Conservatori in Rome. Faced by work of art that embodies so many new values . . . who would be content to talk in terms of "decadence," to treat this "portrait" (even the word "portrait" is misleading) as an unsuccessful imitation of models of the age of Augustus? Who, then, looking at the porphyry sarcophagi in the Vatican Museum would be satisfied with comparing these with the reliefs on the Ara Pacis? Or who would judge the triumphal mosaics of the Christian basilicas of Rome in the light of the frescoes of Pompeii . . . ? No: the art of the late Roman Empire is something new .... The same judgment holds good for the civilization and culture of the fourth century as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Yet once this debt of gratitude is stated, the historian must go on to admit his limitations. The art of late antiquity has provided a vivid and readily communicable paradigm for the central problem of the period--the relation between change and continuity in Late Antique civilization. But to be inspired by a paradigm drawn from a neighboring discipline is a very different matter from claiming to be proficient in that discipline itself. Having enthusiastically followed the lead given by the art historian, the student of Late Antique society finds, only too soon, that he has got out of his depth: he looks back with justifiable dismay at the distance that separates him from the sheer bulk and the problematic nature of the surviving artifacts of late antiquity.

Furthermore, to use the art of late antiquity largely as a paradigm has tended to limit our perception of what is, perhaps, its most challenging feature--an exuberant diversity. There is a tendency among historians of late antiquity, only too faithfully betrayed in the choice of illustrations available in most modern publications, to adhere to a narrow, almost "canonical," selection of works of Late Antique art. A few dramatic illustrations of departures from the classical tradition, and a few tantalizing instances of the preservation of classical standards at unexpectedly late moments in Late Antique history, command the attention of the scholar and the general reader.

What the social historian can do is to take these artifacts, some of which we have often met before in photographs and have now had occasion to see magnificently arranged in this exhibition, and attempt to place them back into the living context of the Late Antique world. We can permit this world to breathe, for a moment, its own, unfamiliar air. By frankly allowing oneself to be bewitched by so much of the beauty and vigor of this art and by asking in what social setting it was first shown, the historian may stumble upon one of the most tantalizing features of Late Antique civilization itself. For in much of Late Antique art there is a splendidly un-self-conscious humanity, whose cumulative effect comes as a challenge to us, accustomed as we have become to a narrow canon of illustrations that stress the abstract, the majestic, or the otherworldly features of late antiquity. This quality of unalloyed delight seems to elude neat divisions between "pagan" and "Christian," "religious" and "secular," "classical" and "nonclassical." It is a reminder of the bedrock of shared humanity in a civilization that, for all its dramatic changes, was firmly held in the rhythms of Mediterranean life and that continued to draw, for secular as well as for religious purposes, on a long-established Mediterranean imagery to express common human needs and hopes--triumph, pleasure, and the yearning to "put off the cares of this life."

To set the works of Late Antique art in their social context involves something more than a feat of archaeological reconstruction, by which each detached fragment is fitted into its correct position. The attempt reveals something of the nature of Late Antique art itself. For this is an art whose most striking feature is that each artifact assumes a context and is fully intelligible only within such a context. Thus, the objects that we now see in an exhibition of Late Antique art are merely so many silent "stills" from what was once a film full of sound and movement.

Let us, therefore, look at a few of the main features of Late Antique society as these affected the way in which the visual arts were orchestrated.

We are dealing with a civilization in which, over large areas of the Mediterranean, the towns had survived, but had changed in style of life and structure. Much of Late Antique art is the art of the Greco-Roman city in its last, strange burst of vigor. The city remained the center of attention for Late Antique men because in one vital respect it had not changed. As always in the ancient world, the city continued to enjoy an importance quite out of proportion to its economic capacity. It was the backdrop against which the upper classes of the Empire acted out the long, intense play of wealth and power, and insured that they and their dependents ostentatiously enjoyed the amenities of civilized living. In the Late Antique sub-urban villas around Antioch, the local magnates still laid out mosaics declaring their intention to exercise, within the city, virtues dear to ancient man: *megalopsychia*, civic generosity, and *apolausis*, the public enjoyment of the good things of life.<sup>2</sup>

A town, therefore, was less a center of production than a carefully nurtured oasis of civilized living. As

Constantine wrote to his praetorian prefect about the small community of Orcistus in Galatia:

For emperors such as ourselves, whose active concern it is to found new cities, to give back their ancient glory to those established long ago, and to restore to life those that have seemed to die, this request is most welcome. For they have claimed that their settlement has, for a long time, flourished with all the splendor of a town: it boasts magistrates holding annual office, it is frequented by civic dignitaries, its plentiful population call themselves "citizens." It is well placed at the joining of four highways, each provided with an official staging post .... And water is abundant there. There are baths, public and private; and the town is decorated with statues of the emperors of old . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Unimpressive though Orcistus might seem to us, by ancient standards it deserved to be a town.

Throughout the Late Antique period, to "renew" a city was the most praiseworthy achievement of the powerful.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on renewal should not be seen merely as a nostalgic concession to the ideals of the classical past; nor need we assume that the "renewed" city had literally stood in ruins. "Renewal" might be no more than a token repair: in the sixth century A.D., a Cretan "renewed" his city by repairing the floor of one cistern.<sup>5</sup> In the eastern Mediterranean, throughout the Late Antique period, there was no lack of men anxious to leave their mark on their community by such gestures. The extent of Late Antique secular building in the Aegean cities of Sardis and Ephesus continues to take the archaeologist by surprise, as does the steadily expanding register of impressive churches, which came to cover the eastern provinces of the Empire from Asia Minor to the Negev.<sup>6</sup> The cumulative evidence for constant building activity, secular as well as ecclesiastical, is bound to modify the sheltered, inward-looking impression of Late Antique art that consideration of a few isolated artifacts might convey. This is not an art of remote shrines or of secluded palaces and country villas. Behind so much of it we can sense the weight of masonry piled up by a governing class determined that the towns and their immediate neighborhood should remain the well-lit stage on which they acted out their power and their culture.

The urge to build, in late antiquity as in earlier periods, grew from the bottom up. Building was part of the manner in which highly competitive local aristocracies had always both sought prestige and, at the same time, judiciously plowed back into the local community a portion of the profits of indecent success. A new building, therefore, registered new power and, at the same time, was an acceptable form of insurance premium against the risks accompanying new power. A well-to-do farmer who built a public bath at Sergilla in northern Syria in the fifth century stated quite frankly that, by such a gesture to his fellows, he had "chased away envy."<sup>7</sup>

The governing classes of the Late Antique world seem at first sight to be totally different from those oligarchies of civic grandees who, in the second century A.D., had decorated their cities with such seemingly effortless generosity. In fact, it was merely the structure of these classes and the nature of their recruitment that had changed. The need to display wealth in an urban setting and to ward off unpopularity among insecure and ambitious men was frequently present throughout the Late Antique period. In the fourth century, there were many imperial officials anxious, on their own account, to leave their mark on the towns of Africa, Greece, and the Aegean.<sup>8</sup> These were joined at the end of the century by the Christian bishops. Such men were hardly urban notables in the style of the Antonine age: their religion was comparatively new and their churches were often the first of their kind. Yet, by the undemanding standards that could make a city even of Orcistus, the late fourth and fifth centuries were a period of urban "renewal" under Christian patronage.

Bishops had not only to provide for newly expanded congregations. They were like their lay equivalents--men anxious to register their new position in Roman society and constantly threatened by rivals. Those who had come from upper-class backgrounds immediately brought with them the ancient reflexes of their class. As early as the reign of Constantine, we find the bishop Cyril Celer of Laodicea Combusta in Phrygia describing his achievements:

having been made bishop by the will of Almighty God; and having administered the episcopate for twenty-five years with great distinction; and having rebuilt from its foundations the entire church and all the adornment around it, consisting of stoa and tetrastoa and paintings and mosaics and fountain and outer gateway; and having furnished it with all the construction in masonry and, in a word, with

everything; and being about to leave the life of this world; I made for myself a plinth and a sarcophagus on which I caused the above to be engraved, for the distinction of the church and of my family."<sup>9</sup>

By the late fourth century, Alexander, the bishop of Tebessa in North Africa, could build a formidable pilgrimage shrine and proudly boast:

This is not the work of any nobleman, but redounds to glory of the name of Alexander the bishop.<sup>10</sup>

In the controversy-ridden world of the mid-fifth century Eastern Empire, the bishop who wished to survive had to pay in the ancient insurance premiums against the risks of success. Theodoret of Cyrillus wrote in his own defense:

When was I ever obnoxious to the many illustrious residents here; It is c» the contrary well known to your excellency that I have spent a considerable part of my ecclesiastical revenues in erecting porticoes and baths, building bridges, and making further provision for public objects.<sup>11</sup>

When Theodoret built his church to house the relics of the apostles Peter and Paul, the ceremony of dedication was a bid to get the civic notables solidly behind him, quite irrespective of their beliefs:

It was my wish to summon you [he wrote to one] to the feast of the holy Apostles and Prophets, not only as a citizen, but as one who shares both my faith and my home. But I am prevented by the state of your opinions. Therefore I put forward no other claims than those of our country .... This participation no difference of sentiment hinders.<sup>12</sup>

Not unnaturally, "lithomania" was the besetting sin of great bishops. Theophilus of Alexandria, for instance, broke with his second-in-command, the *economus* Isidore, because Isidore, knowing Theophilus, had kept back from him the money that a noblewoman had donated to buy clothes for the poor: Theophilus would have sunk it in stone.<sup>13</sup> In the sixth century, the emperor Justinian was forced to legislate against laymen who built churches without providing them with sufficient endowments to support a clergy and the running costs of the liturgy: the ancient reputation of *ktistes*, "founder," had been all that such donors had wanted.<sup>14</sup> Justinian's law assumes a background where prestige continued to be measured in stone.

Thus, faced by Christian works of art in late antiquity, we should be careful to look at the dedicatory inscriptions. These were carved on the portals of churches or, in the case of the more important ones, were placed in mosaics, where the donor is shown holding the church, or they ring the splendid silverwork patens and chandeliers associated with the liturgy of the churches. Around the scenes that hold the attention of the art historian, such as the Communion of the Apostles on the Riha paten at Dumbarton Oaks [Age of Spirituality, Cat. no. 547], we are plainly intended to see the inscription, carefully worked around the edge:

For the peace of the soul of Sergia, [daughter] of John, and of Theodosius, and for the salvation of Megalos and Nonnous and their children.<sup>15</sup>

Such inscriptions take us into the human context that imbued each work of art and that gave it meaning to contemporaries. For beneath the Christian formulae--"in accordance with prayer," "for the repose of the soul," "for the remission of sins"--we can sense the unabated energies and the insecurities of the little groups of ruling families throughout the Empire, who continued to litter the landscape of the Mediterranean with amazing new buildings and to fill the treasuries of the churches with precious objects.

The emperor merely stood at the top of a pyramid of competitive builders. As in Hellenistic and Roman times, the emperor was no more than the urban benefactor writ large. If the majority of the Late Antique buildings best known to us--from Diocletian's Baths in Rome to Justinian's Hagia Sophia in Constantinople--are imperial, this merely registers the crushing superiority of the resources available to the emperor. Whenever direct comparisons are possible, they illustrate this clearly. Private persons, even Christian bishops with the accumulated wealth of their churches behind them, competed with "conventional" armaments against a patron

who worked on a "nuclear" scale. Constantine could contribute 3.7 tons of silver and 300 kilograms of gold to the churches of Rome at a time when the bishop, Sylvester, contributed 55 kilograms of silver and one-third of a kilogram of gold.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, the cumulative impression, at least for the eastern Mediterranean, is of a society where the overpowering wealth of the emperors never extinguished private urges. Wealth and the motivation to spend were both present. So also was a principal prerequisite for rapid building: manpower. If anything, the eastern Mediterranean appears to have suffered not from a manpower shortage, but from something equally dangerous in a primitive economy--a population rise, or possibly, an increasing maldistribution of the population.<sup>17</sup> In the fifth and sixth centuries, as in the Northern Europe of the late thirteenth century, we have the sense of great buildings made possible by a weight of population pressing dangerously on the available resources. The decision to build was a moment of good cheer for a region condemned by shortage of land and the rhythms of a Mediterranean climate to months of unemployment.<sup>18</sup> When Bishop Porphyry began to build a great church at Gaza,

the construction went ahead from day to day with great speed and enthusiasm. For no worker went short on his wages, but the bishop, as an act of public generosity-*philotimmos*-gave a bonus to the laborers . . . ."<sup>19</sup>

We must set some of the greatest building works of the Late Antique period against this harsh background. Constantinople in the early sixth century was full of underemployed immigrants from the provinces.<sup>20</sup> There is little wonder that the city exploded in the great Nika, or "Victory," riot of 532. Justinian's ambitious building program formed one aspect of his anxious attempt to control the urban populations of the Empire. And the motivations that led to the rebuilding of the Hagia Sophia after the riot were as mixed as those of all other rulers placed in similar situations, from the emperor Augustus to the eighteenth-century sultan Moulay Ismail of Morocco:

The Emperor is wonderfully addicted to building: yet it is a question whether he is more addicted to that, or pulling down, for they say if all his Buildings were now standing, by a moderate computation, they would reach to Fez, twelve leagues off; and those who have been near him since the beginning of his Reign, have observed him eternally building and pulling down, shutting up doors and breaking out new ones in the Walls. But he tells them this is done to occupy his People; for says he, if I have a Bag full of Ratts, unless I keep that Bag stirring they will eat their way through . . . .<sup>21</sup>

The unflagging urge to build, seen against a permanent urban backdrop, is an aspect of the civilization of late antiquity that we have come to appreciate recently, as our archaeological evidence for the eastern provinces of the Empire increases. It is closely related to a further aspect of Late Antique life: the careful elaboration and redefinition of the ceremonial life of the towns.

This aspect of late Roman life, as it is shown most clearly in the ceremonials of the imperial court, has recently been the subject of a series of most illuminating studies.<sup>22</sup> What emerges increasingly is that these are *urban* ceremonies: as a fourth-century rabbi said, "It is in the cities that the majesty of the king is shown."<sup>23</sup> Far from being conducted in the sheltered solemnity of a palace, late Roman ceremonial assumes an urban backdrop--the town gates of the city that the emperor visits, the open audience hall where the emperor receives his subjects, the imperial box in the circuses that adjoined all imperial palaces, of which the Hippodrome of Constantinople is the best known.<sup>24</sup> These ceremonials can hardly be called "court" ceremonies. They grew from the streets up. As with his buildings, so in the ceremonial surrounding his person, the emperor was the urban *philotimos*, the openhanded man of power. Hence, the ceremonies associated with the traditional demonstrations of local status by private citizens were merely absorbed into the imperial ceremonial. In cities where the local aristocracies remained strong, such as Rome and Antioch, or were increasingly overshadowed by the Christian bishop, as in Alexandria, this ceremonial was never limited exclusively to official and imperial occasions.<sup>25</sup>

In relation to imperial ceremonies, it has been pointed out that these were occasions on which sight and sound

and even, we must remember, the magic of smell that meant so much to ancient men, were orchestrated into a single, satisfying whole:

For the panegyrics [the speeches delivered on such occasions] bring out one aspect of the classical perception of a basic harmony between the different arts: visual and verbal expression were meant to go hand in hand.<sup>26</sup>

We should look with care at the way in which the works of art connected with imperial ceremonial or with the great *tableau vivant* of the Christian liturgy fitted into a single whole. What we now see are only so many fragments detached from a ceremonial setting whose core has vanished.

To take an obvious example, the carved frieze around the Arch of Constantine [Age of Spirituality, Cat. no. 58] shows various ceremonial occasions: the emperor setting out, arriving, speaking in public, distributing largess. Each detail on this frieze, however, assumes an awareness of a closely knit complex of works of art that played a part in the ceremonies. In all such ceremonies, we begin with architectural settings that could range from the overwhelming decor of early fourth-century Rome, to the palaces, gates, and circuses of the new capitals at Trier and Constantinople,<sup>27</sup> to the cramped imperial residence of a little Near Eastern town on the road to the Persian frontier where, the emperor Julian complained, the inhabitants had overdone their ceremonial greeting with too much incense!<sup>28</sup> We continue with magnificent gifts to privileged persons, such as the Missorium of Theodosius [Age of Spirituality, Cat. no. 64].<sup>29</sup> The same ideas are clearly condensed in the seemingly random detail of the small gold coins issued for such occasions.<sup>30</sup>

What we now see was once part of a single whole, where many works of art converged with the spoken or sung word to create a single impression. In this situation, no work of art had to say any more than it was intended to say in its correct place and time. Just as the shared idiom of the classics could enable a speaker to set the tone of a whole train of thought with the help of one half line of Homer or Vergil, so the hand of God, the arch of a palace, or the position of a figure in relation to the top and bottom registers of a panel would be sufficient to set the scene in its correct context. For the rest, the speaker could assume a tissue of verbal and visual associations that have not survived in their full richness, but that were no less precise for being widespread and unselfconscious. As Charles Pietri has recently written regarding the growth of the iconography of Sts. Peter and Paul in fourth-century Rome,

Avant de rechercher les elaborations subtiles et reflechies d'une ecclesiologie, l'enquete doit commencer par ces manifestations plus collectives et spontanees.<sup>31</sup>

Late Antique art is not an erudite or an esoteric art. But it is the art of a city, and an art that assumed onlookers who could supply the associations "triggered off" by a few clear pointers. One example, a fragment from Eunapius, an early fifth-century historian, enables us to appreciate how little of the *tableau vivant* of urban life has come down to us, for it refers to the painted billboards on which the emperor depicted his triumphs.<sup>32</sup> It also reveals a population that was expected to react to any change in the common meanings of Late Antique official art.

Perses, prefect in [New] Rome, brought the good fortune of the Roman Empire into contempt and mockery. He set up many small billboards in the middle of the stadion, and wanting to express the imperial deeds in a picture, he made a laughing stock of his message and secretly held up what he had written to ridicule by means of the picture. For the picture showed nothing of the courage of the emperor, the strength of the soldiers or the course of an open and just war—merely a hand, as if coming out of the clouds, with the inscription: "The Hand of God chases away the barbarians,"<sup>33</sup>

Yet to place too much emphasis on the imperial and the ecclesiastical aspects of the art of late antiquity is to allow its most tantalizing feature to slip between our fingers. The art of the emperors and of the Church was plainly a public, official art. But what has also survived in great quantities is the art of private persons—above all, of the aristocracy that, as courtiers, administrators, and great landowners, dominated late Roman society. And we have to explain the full-blooded secularity, expressed in continuing pagan imagery, of so many Late

Antique works patronized by this aristocracy. To treat these works as survivals from an unregenerate pagan past, or as products of mindless traditionalism in the choice of motifs, or as a succession of self-conscious classical "revivals" taking place only in conservative circles is to misunderstand the power and the social relevance of much of the secular art of late antiquity.

We are dealing with an elusive phenomenon, one that had been building up for centuries in the Roman Empire: the continuation and re-formulation of paganism to create something new—a frankly secular heraldry of success.<sup>34</sup> The "classical" and the "pagan" tradition in late antiquity is not an inheritance of the past that gradually lost momentum. If anything, it took a new lease on life by being shaken, like the pieces of a kaleidoscope, into a different pattern to serve the needs of a different, postclassical society. The postclassical society of the fourth century saw the rise to power of a new class of magnates, men who had accumulated more wealth and power than had their more evenly balanced peers of the classical period. The traditional urban landscape in and around the cities was dominated by their new palaces.<sup>35</sup> In the countryside, too, their villas were maintained with a splendor equal to a townhouse.<sup>36</sup> The great estate and the joys of the hunt complemented the more urban theater in which their power was shown.<sup>37</sup> The many Late Antique mosaics from the floors of such palaces and villas, and the astonishing textiles that have survived in the dry sands of Egypt, give some idea of the splendor of the buildings with their curtained colonnades.<sup>38</sup> There is a colorfulness, a fantasy, and a frank use of pagan themes whose very robustness comes as a surprise.

Yet, it should hardly come as a surprise. The new elites of the late Roman world may have lived in a "postclassical" society; but it was not a "nonclassical" society. They still breathed the air of the classical world, and to expect them to breathe any other would be like expecting the inhabitants of this planet to dispense with breathing oxygen. To the Late Antique world, the classical tradition was not what it has become for us, a distant ideal that could be "revived" or imitated at will: it was simply the only tradition that was known to work<sup>39</sup> And it was irreplaceable, largely because it contained so many of the mythological motifs that still summed up more appositely than could any other available tradition the high moments, the hopes, and the turning points in the life of the *homme moyen sensuel*.<sup>40</sup>

Why this should have been so in an age that saw the final establishment of Christianity as the major religion of the Mediterranean world always remains something of a puzzle, especially so to anyone confronted with the uninhibited use of pagan mythological scenes in Late Antique art. In order to explain it, we have to explain an "air-pocket" in Late Antique Christianity. Throughout the Late Antique period, Christianity was a strict, "otherworldly" religion only for a minority of monks and, with far greater difficulty, some clergymen and a few quite exceptional laymen who had opted to follow the teachings of Christ in their entirety.<sup>41</sup> The remainder of the faithful were frankly accepted to be "men of this world"—*kosmikoi, saeculares*. The clergy and the few ascetic heroes might bring into their lives a touch of the otherworld; but the *kosmikoi*, the men and women caught in the hard disciplines of mundane life, were left by their leaders to find their own, strictly secular, ways of expressing how they stood in this world.<sup>42</sup> It was not the business of the monks and bishops to offer a more Christian version of worldly life. They could only offer its antithesis—a life committed to the otherworld. Thus, the perfectionism of the few full adherents to the Christian message left behind them a moral vacuum that the majority of average Christians filled with gusto from the traditions that lay at hand. The secularity of large areas of the society of the Christian Roman Empire, therefore, stood massively intact.

As a result, the Late Antique period was an "age of spirituality" only for a small, and frequently disapproving, minority. For the majority of the inhabitants of the Christianized Empire, and especially for those successful enough in the world to afford the heavy outlay involved in patronizing the arts, it was a time when they enjoyed as best they could the centuries-old traditions of urban life. Take, for example, Edessa, the oldest Christian city in the Near East, but one that lay on the periphery of the culture of the classical Greco-Roman world. As late as the end of the fifth century, the secular life of this successful frontier city of the Eastern Empire could only be expressed in terms borrowed from the old pagan culture. This is how a monk observed his undoubtedly Christian fellows behaving on one festival:

Whilst these things were taking place, there came round again the time of that festival at which the heathen tales were sung; and the citizens took even more pains about it than usual. For seven days

previously they were going up in crowds to the theatre at eventide, clad in linen garments, and wearing turbans, with their loins ungirt. Lamps were lighted before them, and they were burning incense, and holding vigils the whole night, walking about the city and praising the dancer until morning, with singing and shouting and lewd behavior.<sup>43</sup>

For such men, the classical tradition, despite its overpowering pagan associations, was simply part of the hard-won skill of living in a Mediterranean environment. The traditional images had become part of a neutral technology of life. It would be as unreal to expect the leaders of Late Antique Christianity to have successfully "Christianized" this tradition in their art and literature as it would be to expect modern men to "Christianize" the design of an automobile or to produce a "Marxist" wrist watch. Thus, when pagan motifs were used in the works of art they commissioned, the aristocrats of the Late Antique world were usually as insensible to their former religious overtones as were the English country gentlemen who, over a thousand years later, shocked Puritan writers by turning yet again to the unfailing reserves of classical imagery in order to decorate their tombs in a manner that did justice to their social status:

And which is worse, they garnish their Tombes nowadays, with the pictures of naked men and women; raising out of the dust, and bringing into the church, memories of the Heathen gods and goddesses, with all their whirligigs: and this (as I take it) is more the fault of the Tombe makers, then theirs who set them aworke.<sup>44</sup>

What is important to note, therefore, is not that the motifs of Late Antique art remained largely pagan and were constantly reiterated, often by known Christian patrons, but exactly which motifs were mobilized most frequently and for what purpose. The common theme of so much of the classical imagery of late antiquity is triumph and good living. It is an imagery that was retained and amplified so as to make plain the *phantasia*, the "pomp and circumstance," of the wealthy-hence, the frequency of hunting and circus themes. For in town and country alike, the hunt and the circus were the theater in which ancient men performed in public the play of fortune and success.<sup>45</sup> The moments of contained competitive violence that were acted out in the circus, in the form of wild-beast shows and chariot races, were essential to the life of the Late Antique city. They were more than random sporting occasions. Symbolized in these games was the good fortune of the magnates in general, and of the greatest magnate of them all, the emperor. A mystique of imperial success, totally non-Christian in expression yet unconnected with the ancient forms of classical pagan worship, came to be associated with the chariot races in the Hippodrome of Constantinople.<sup>46</sup> Christian clergymen were allowed to attend these hauntingly pagan occasions because, as a later canonist observed, the emperor was always present and, consequently, no harm need come to a tender Christian conscience.<sup>47</sup>

Altogether, one cannot resist the impression that many ancient themes were subtly orchestrated and simplified in the Late Antique period, and that, if anything, a stronger current runs through them. Isolated figures have a majesty that is often lacking in the previous mythological tradition. "Personifications" in Late Antique art are not airy abstractions: they add the weight of personality to deeply held ideas. Thus, the figures of the Tyche, the "Good Fortune" of the individual cities of the Empire, gained in supernatural "presence" [Cat. nos. 153-56].<sup>48</sup> Such figures stepped confidently into a gap that had opened up in men's minds between a very remote Christian God and a city whose vicissitudes still mattered to them. The "inconsequential talk" that a sixth-century monk might indulge in continued to hinge on "agitation in the city, its peace and its prosperity";<sup>49</sup> and when this peace was disrupted in early seventh-century Thessalonike, the inhabitants were reassured not by a vision of St. Demetrius, but by the appearance at his side of Lady Eutaxia, the personification of good order, bringing to bear the full weight of her almost divine power.<sup>50</sup> It is the same with more private images. The Hestia Polyolbos now at Dumbarton Oaks once hung as the symbol of the good fortune of a great Egyptian nobleman's house. She may strike us as "a document of a dying paganism," but she does not seem to have grown pale.<sup>51</sup> The art of late antiquity makes plain that she had come to stay. As long as the secular framework of the later Empire survived intact, the new classes that gained predominance within it needed an imagery with which to express their hopes and ambitions. Hence, the paradox that pagan motifs and new forms of ceremonial intimately connected with the pagan past were recurrently injected into the life of a self-confident Christian aristocracy. A generation after public paganism had declined in the cities in the early fourth century, the feast of the Kalends of January--a feast previously limited to Rome in the classical Roman Empire--spread



from one end of Romania to the other.<sup>52</sup> It spread because it was a feast connected with a new ceremonial of power: the entry into office of the consuls, whose ceremonial status had been vastly expanded by Constantine. It was associated with the formal receptions and the gift-giving that linked the great men to their clients. The celebration was not a feast of the gods, but a feast of men entering unashamedly into the enjoyment of power and prosperity. It lasted through the centuries, deep into the Middle Ages, to disturb the Christian bishops with annual reminders of the natural "man of the world" and his aspirations, expressed with all the full-blooded ceremoniousness of the Late Antique city, splendidly untinged by the new faith.

Yet, the Christian bishops were very often the brothers and the uncles of the men who displayed their power with such exuberance.<sup>53</sup> They shared the same Mediterranean culture and created for themselves similarly extroverted ways of showing the majesty of their new religion. The great celebrations of Easter, especially if they coincided with the dedication of a new church, were a faithful echo of the openhanded euphrosyne, the "good cheer," expected of an urban magnate. Porphyry of Gaza

gathered the monks of the neighborhood together, a thousand of them, and the other pious clerics, laymen and bishops and held good cheer--*epoiesen euphrosynen*--the days of Easter. And it was as if one could see the angelic choirs, not only during the service in the church, but around the banqueting table.... For after meat, psalms were chanted, and hymns followed the drinking.<sup>54</sup>

Very often in the sixth century, the two strands coincided. The secular good fortune of the little communities of the eastern Mediterranean was held to depend to such an extent on the vicarious intercession of monks and clergy that at Qasr el-Lebya the Tyche of the city, symbol of urban prosperity, could appear inside the church.<sup>55</sup>

In many ways, Late Antique Christianity was not "otherworldly" in the rarefied sense that is usually associated with this period. For this "otherworld" was no abstraction; it was a precise place, paradise. The solemn liturgy, the blaze of lights, the shimmering mosaics, and the brightly colored curtains of a Late Antique church were there to be appreciated in their entirety. As with imperial ceremonials, these trappings should not be detached from one another.<sup>56</sup> Taken altogether, they provided a glimpse of paradise. For this reason alone, one should not make too much of the reservations that Early Christians are supposed to have had about the representation of human beings, nor of the later lifting of this inhibition with the cult of icons.<sup>57</sup> To do so would be an error in perspective. The representational elements in Late Antique Christian mosaics are a subject of absorbing interest to us. But these elements would have been swamped in the overwhelming impression conveyed by the building, its overall decoration, and its liturgy. In a Late Antique church, the processional movements, the heavy silver of the sacred vessels and the bindings of the Gospel books [Age of Spirituality Cat. nos- 531-41] as they flashed by on their way to the altar, the mysterious opacity of the curtains shrouding the entrance (even if the curtain itself might have been woven with frankly secular scenes<sup>58</sup>), these things in themselves were the visual "triggers" of a Late Antique worshiper's sense of majesty.

Indeed, it is in such terms that Late Antique sources describe their churches. To these writers, churches are not iconographical puzzles. They are *ho topos*: the "place," where it was possible to share for a moment in the eternal repose of the saints in paradise. Light seems trapped in the churches.<sup>59</sup> The blaze of lamps and gold mosaic recapture the first moment of Creation: "Dark chaos is fled away."<sup>60</sup> They are heavy with incense, which brought into this world a touch of paradise, conceived as a mountain covered with trees in full bloom.<sup>61</sup> Their floors even attempt to catch the same sense of ease and release from care that forms such a poignant theme in the private mansions of the great from Hellenistic times up to the establishment of Islam and beyond: one church could even be described as a meadow blooming with flowers.<sup>62</sup> In the northern Syrian church of Huarte, Adam sits with imperial serenity among the beasts in a paradise regained.<sup>63</sup> Two churches, the one near the dangerous mountains of Isauria and the other set up by its bishop, "a man of subtle mind," in Apamea, a city with a tradition of philosophical leisure, have mosaics depicting the coming of the Kingdom of Peace among the wild animals scattered on the floor.<sup>64</sup> Christians hoped to find in their shrines a "place of fulfillment and sweet perfume,"<sup>65</sup> the echo of a rest beyond the grave in what was still a very classical landscape--because it was a human and a Mediterranean one, "in a grassy place by refreshing waters, whence pain and suffering and groaning have fled."<sup>66</sup>

## NOTES

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4. L. Robert, "Epigrammes du Bas-Empire," *Hellenica*, IV, 1948, p. 14, note 5.
5. A. C. Bandy, *The Greek Christian Inscriptions of Crete*, Athens, 1970, p. 63, no. 33.
6. P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, pp. 29 and 111-12 for bibliography. C. Lepelley and B. Beaujare, "Du nouveau sur les villes de l'Afrique romaine au temps de saint Augustin," *Revue des études augustiniennes*, XXIII, 1977, pp. 422-3r. H. C. Butler, *Early Churches in Syria*, Princeton, 1929. J. Lassus, *Les sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie*, Paris, 1947. G. Tchalenko, *Les Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord*, Paris, 1958. A. Ovadiah, *Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land*, Bonn, 1970 (*Theophaneia*, XXII).
7. *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, A. Poidebard and R. Mouterde, eds., IV, Paris, 1955, no. 1490.
8. L. Robert, "Epigrammes du Bas-Empire," pp. 35-114
9. *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua*, W. M. Calder, ed., Manchester, 1928, I, p. 89, no. 170
10. E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Veteres Christianae*, Berlin, 1925, I, no. 1825. See now J. Christern, *Das frühchristliche Pilgerheiligtum von Tebessa*, Wiesbaden, 1976.
11. Theodoret, *Epistle 8 1*, B. Jackson, ed., New York, 1892 (*Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*).
12. Theodoret, *Epistle 68*, B. Jackson, ed.
13. Palladius *Dialogus de vita Johannis 6*, Migne, PG, XLVII, Col. 22.
14. Justinian *Novella 67*, R. Schoell and W. Kroll, eds., *Corpus Juris Civilis*, III, Berlin, 1928.
15. *Handbook of the Byzantine Collection*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1967, p. 17, no. 61.
16. C. Pietri, *Roma Christiana*, Paris, 1977, I, p. 84.
17. E. Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique . . .*, pp. 426-27.
18. *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, A. Poidebard and R. Mouterde, eds., V, Paris, 1959, no. 1999.
19. *Marc le Diacre Vie de Porphyre 83*, H. Gregoire and M.-A. Kugener, eds., Paris, 1930, pp. 65-66.
20. Justinian *Novella 80*, R. Schoell and W. Kroll, eds. E. Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique . . .*, pp. 179-81.
21. J. Windus, *A Journey to Mequinez*, London, 1725, PP. 1 15-16. See P. Brunt, "The Roman Mob," *Past &*

Present, XXXV, 1966, pp. 14-16.

22. See, for example, S. G. MacCormack, "Latin prose Panegyrics: tradition and discontinuity in the late Roman Empire," *Revue des etudes augustiniennes*, XXII, 1976, pp. 2g-77, esp. p. 42.

23. Pesikta Rabbati, M. Friedmann, ed., Vienna, 1880, p. g 5a.

24. J. H. Humphrey, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Hippodrome at Caesarea," *Bulletin of The American School of Oriental Research*, CCXIII, 1974, pp. 2-45. V. Popovic and E. L. Ochsenslager, "Der spatantike Hippodrom in Sirmium," *Germania*, LIV, 1976, pp. 156-81.

25. As is shown in the case of the translation of relics by Christian bishops. See N. Gussone, "Adventus-Zeremoniell and Translation von Reliquien," *Fruhmittelalterliche Studien*, X, 1976, p. 128.

26. S. G. MacCormack, "Latin prose Panegyrics . . . ," p. 46.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43

28. Julian, Epistle 58, W. C. Wright, ed., *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, III, Cambridge, Mass., 1953.

29. R. MacMullen, "The Emperor's Largesses," *Latomus*, XXI, 1962, pp. 159 ff.

30. H. Mattingly, "The Imperial 'Vota'," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXVI, 1950, pp. 155-95 and XXVII, 1951, pp. 219-68.

31. C. Pietri, *Roma Christiana*, p. 317.

32. One dearly wishes that the pictures of pantomimes, charioteers, and wild-beast fighters that cluttered and obscured the imperial images in public places had also survived. For references to these scenes, see *Codex Theodosianus* 15. 17, 12, 7: Mommsen, ed., Berlin, 1954.

33. Eunapius, fragment 178, C. Mueller, ed., *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, IV, Paris, 1868.

34. The process by which the cultic associations of pagan motifs came to be eclipsed by their use as status symbols had been long underway in the Roman Empire. See Tertullian *De idololatria* 8.4: "Frequentior est omni superstitione luxuria et ambitio. Lances et scyphos facilius ambitio quam superstitio desiderabit. Coronas quoque magis luxuria quam sollemnitas erogat"; A. Reifferscheid and G. Wissowa, eds., *Corpus Christianorum*, II, 2, Turnholt, 1954. Cultivated Christians could take part as competitors in festivals in the third century. See L. Robert, *Hellenica*, XI-XII, 1960, p. 424: "Le fait est a noter, et on peut penser que . . . le coute 'spectacles' s'emportait a cette epoque sur le sens culturel des ceremonies."

35. P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, pp. 49 and 116.

36. R. Paribeni, "Le dimore dei potentiores nel Basso Impero," *Romische Mitteilungen*, LV, 1940, pp. 144-54. E.B. Thomas, *Romische Villen in Pannonien*, Budapest, 1964. M. Cagianò de Azevedo, "Ville rustiche tardoantiche a installazioni agricole altomedioevali," *XIII Settimana di studi del Centro di studi sull'alto Medio Evo*, Spoleto, 1966, pp. 663 ff.

37. HT Brandenburg, "Bellerophon christianus?" *Romische Quartalschrift*, LXIII, 1968, pp. 4g-86. K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage*, Oxford, 1978.

38. V. Gervers, "An Early Christian Curtain in the Royal Ontario Museum," *Studies in Textile History in Memory of Harold B. Burnham*, V. Gervers, ed., Toronto, 1977, pp. 56-81.

39. This is well put by J. Christern, *Fruhchristliches Pilgerheiligtum*, p. 260: "Die Situation der Spatantike war ja anders als z.B. die des 19jhts, in dem man fur verschiedene Bauaufgaben den jeweils passend erscheinenden Stil wahlen and anwenden konnte; vielmehr gab es fur die Wahl der Stilmittel grundsatzlich nur eine Alternative: entweder verzichtete man auf architektonischen Schmuck, oder man griff, wenn Aufwands- and Representationsformen erforderlich schienen, zum klassischen Formapparat; er war der einzige, der dafur zur Verfiigung stand."
40. See J. Fink, "Mythologische and biblische Themen in der Sarkophagplastik des 3. Jahrhunderts," *Rivista de Archeologia Cristiana*, XXVII, 1951, pp. 167-8g.
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42. P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies*, LXI, 1972, pp. 97-100; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1964 1, PP. 979-85.
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45. H. Brandenburg, "Bellerophon christianus?" pp. 71-72. K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, pp. 46-108.
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47. Theodorus Balsamon *Comment. in Canones*, Migne, PG, CXXXVII, col. 593 B.
48. S. G. MacCormack, "Roma, Constantinopolis, the Emperor and his Genius," *Classical Quarterly*, XXV, 1975, PP- 131-50.
49. Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaze: *Correspondence*, L. Regnault and P. Lemaire, trans., Solesmes, 1972, p. 317.
50. *Mimcula Sancti Demetrii*, Migne, PG, CXV I, col. 1268
51. P. Friedlander, *Documents of Dying Paganism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945, pp. 1-26.
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54. Marc le Diacre *Vie de Porphyre* 92, p. 71.
55. A. Grabar, "La Mosaique de pavement de Qasr el-Lebya," *Comptes Rendus de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, June 1969, pp. 264-82.
56. T F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Comtantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*, University Park, Pa., 1971.
57. For a long overdue and effective refutation of this view, see M. Murray, "Art and the Early Church;" *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. XXVIII, 1977, pp. 303-45
58. M. Murray, "Art and the Early Church," p. 340. V. Gervers, "An Early Christian Curtain," pp. 68-72.

59. *Inscriptiones Latinae Veteres Christianae*, 1, no. 1770.
60. *Inscriptiones Latinae Veteres Christianae*, I, no. 1769 A.
61. Gregory of Tours *Libri Historiarum* 2. 31, Migne, PL, LXXI, col. 226, on the baptism of Clovis: "talemque ibi gratiam adstantibus tribuit, ut aestimarent se paradisi odoribus collocari."
62. Gregory of Nyssa *Encomium in Theodorum*, Migne, PG, XLVI, col. 737 D.
63. M. Z. and P. Canivet, "La mosaïque d'Adam dans l'église syrienne d'Huarte (Ve s.)," *Cahiers archéologiques*, XXIV, 1975, pp. 49-60.
64. M. Gough, "The peaceful Kingdom," *Mélanges A.M. Mansel*, Ankara, 1974, pp. 411-19. J. C. Balty, "L'évêque Paul et le programme architectural et décoratif de la cathédrale d'Apamée," *Mélanges d'histoire ancienne et d'archéologie offerts à Paul Collart*, P. Ducrey, ed., Lausanne, 1976, pp. 31-46, esp. 41-44.
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