Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World

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Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World

Edited by *Eva R. Hoffman*

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Series Editor's Preface

The Blackwell Anthologies in Art History series is intended to bring together writing on a given subject drawn from a broad historical and historiographic perspective. The aim of each volume is to present key writings, while at the same time challenging their canonical status through the inclusion of texts that provide different approaches, interpretation, and ideas. *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World* brings together a new and important synthesis of fundamental texts for the study of art history from the third to the thirteenth centuries CE. The combination of texts in this volume responds to the purpose of the series by working to promote an integrated study of the art and culture in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean. The anthology presents material that has usually been separated, both spatially and temporally, through adherence to the traditional subcategories including "Early Christian," "Byzantine," "Romanesque," and "Islamic." This division of the artifacts, texts, and histories of art from these periods has isolated Late Antique from Medieval, East from West, Byzantine from Islamic, Jewish from Christian, and Christian from Muslim, and this volume seeks to break down these discrete categories to enable fresh interpretations and perspectives. The novel configuration of the material in this volume provides a stimulating resource for students and teachers alike. Moreover, through its originality and questioning of established approaches, *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World* makes a very welcome addition to the series.

Dana Arnold
London 2006

Preface and Acknowledgments

This volume is about exploring connections and interactions. Its focus is on historical encounters in the Mediterranean and, fittingly, it is the direct product of parallel present-day collaborations and exchange. The collection of essays here attests to the growing cross-disciplinary interests of scholars today. These scholars, specialists in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Islamic art, are no longer content to remain within their disciplinary boundaries. They now attend each other's conferences and often discover that their most interesting research overlaps. What has emerged, above all, is a milieu of collaborations and interactions. I am very grateful to the authors whose work, collected here, provides the multiple vantage points necessary to observe and understand the dynamic interplay between boundaries and crossroads in the medieval Mediterranean, between the third and thirteenth centuries.

The volume has evolved quite naturally through my own teaching, both at my home institution, Tufts University, as well as at Harvard University, where I have taught occasional seminars. I am ever grateful to both undergraduate and graduate students for their eagerness and enthusiasm, and for their questions and challenges. Over the years, their responses and discussions of these and other essays have inspired me in the collection here. These articles can and are meant to be read and reread, with new discoveries in each reading. Of course, there were many other articles that, for reasons of copyright, space, and other complications, could not be included. The number of illustrations, unfortunately, has been strictly limited to keep costs down. I thank Blackwell Publishing for their support in this endeavor to reconceptualize the time-worn rubric of Early-Christian and Byzantine art.

I wish also to acknowledge my great debt to colleagues and friends, especially to Madeline Caviness, Eleanor Hight, Gulru Necipoglu, Eric Rosenberg, and David Roxburgh, for their support and friendship. I am especially grateful to

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E. H.
September 2006

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Introduction: Remapping the Art of the Mediterranean

The primary objective of this volume is to promote an integrated study of the art and culture in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean from late antiquity through medieval times (3rd–13th centuries CE). I have sought to bring together material that routinely had been separated, both spatially and temporally, by traditional subcategories within Medieval art such as "Early Christian," "Byzantine," "Romanesque," "Islamic," resulting in the study of these periods in isolation, dividing late antique from medieval, East from West, Byzantine from Islamic, Jewish from Christian, and Christian from Muslim, and so on. There are many reasons for these classifications, ranging from the practical organization of a complex body of knowledge into manageable units, emphasizing depth and specialization, to the self-interested structure of Western scholarship, which was founded on and invested in the creation of hierarchies of knowledge and disciplines. In all instances, however, it must be acknowledged that these categories are anything but transparently obvious. Rather they result from an active process of "mapping," whereby cultural boundaries are defined through inclusion and omission. The collection of essays in this volume presents a strategy for remapping the art of the Mediterranean, employing a model that opens up political, religious, and stylistic boundaries in European, Islamic, and Byzantine realms. The premise here is that there is more to be gained by studying the art and culture of the Mediterranean holistically than by carving it up into historical and geographical categories and studying each grouping separately.

Since the 1970s, late antique (*spätantike*, coined by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl in the late nineteenth century) has become the common appellation for the period between the third and seventh centuries CE.[1] While it is not completely unproblematic, through its link to antiquity, the term "late antique," to some extent, serves to avoid associations with the disparaging reference to the decay and fall of the Roman Empire. The term also subsumes labels such as "Early Christian," "Coptic," and "Late Roman," each of which represents only selective components and interests within the diversity and multicultural breadth that characterize the art and culture of the period as a whole. Finally, the broader designation late antique has allowed for the expansive geographical consideration of the late Roman Empire alongside the Sasanian Empire, as well as chronological continuities from the third to the seventh centuries CE and beyond. More and more evidence suggests that the Islamic conquests during the seventh century did not represent a dramatic break from the preexisting late antique culture.[2] As observed by the editors of *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World*, "From the world of Constantine to the seemingly different world of Damascus of ʻAbd al-Malik [the reader] may be surprised to see that not everything had changed."[3] These scholars have further proposed an extension of late antiquity, pushing the end date to the year 800, including not only the first Islamic Empire, the Umayyads, but also the establishment of Baghdad under the succeeding Abbasid Empire. The particulars of the debate over the precise dates for the beginning and end of the period of late antiquity matter less than what this debate suggests about the blurred transitions and overlaps between periods and the enduring continuities between antiquity at one end of the continuum and the medieval world at the other.

There has also been growing acceptance among scholars of greater fluidity between late antique and medieval art.[4] Herbert Kessler, in his evaluation of the state of the field, observed: "history offers no clear break."[5] Concerning the problem of the marginalization of Byzantine art within the sphere of medieval art, Robert Nelson has advocated more inclusive strategies within medieval art that would incorporate the artistic cultures of the many regions of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, and the Christian and Muslim lands of the Levant. Nelson asks: "What if issues in medieval art were pursued beyond our traditional disciplinary subcategories of artistic medium, chronology or geography?"[6] This challenge provides the guiding spirit for this volume. What follows here is a practical and theoretical contribution toward addressing this issue.

This volume does not provide a comprehensive survey of the material, nor attempt to integrate all of medieval art or even all of medieval Mediterranean art. It is, instead, an anthology comprising selected texts on late antiquity, and the Byzantine, Islamic, Venetian, and Norman Mediterranean realms, as well as minority cultures within these governing political states. The collaborative format of the anthology lends itself perfectly to the challenge of the cross-disciplinary approach, while providing the necessary scholarly expertise and resources. Taken together, the collection of essays allows us to reimagine and remap the Mediterranean along an interactive network of connections. Instead of fixed categories, I would propose a model of dynamic geographical and chronological continuities. Along with these continuities comes an understanding of context; of what came before and of pathways of exchange and intersection within the broader sphere of medieval art in other centers. This rethinking is informed by the current postmodern mentality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, characterized by flexible global reconceptualization, much as the taxonomy of categorization spoke to the earlier twentieth-century modern models.

I can think of no more appropriate focus for this model of dynamic continuity and cultural exchange than the Mediterranean world. The name "Mediterranean" (the Middle Sea) first appeared sometime during late antiquity, to emphasize the sea's centrality to the coastlines and surrounding landmasses.[7] The longevity of this label speaks to a continued perception of the Mediterranean as the "sea in the middle." Major studies have shown the Mediterranean region as a site of remarkable continuities. Klavs Ransborg has presented archeological evidence for relatively unchanging patterns of settlement and material culture around the Mediterranean from late antiquity until roughly the eleventh century.[8] The emphasis on the *longue durée*, the fact that changes in Mediterranean society occurred only gradually over long periods of time rather than by political upheavals, is an idea long ago advanced by Fernand Braudel.[9] And, in their more recent study, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell have advanced the notion of systems of local exchange, and of shared environmental, biological, and anthropological factors, in shaping and connecting the Mediterranean world.[10]

Along with continuity, the Mediterranean is also defined through interaction. From its location in the middle, the Mediterranean has always maintained a delicate balance, and a paradoxical position. On the one hand, this great body of water served as a natural boundary, separating lands across the sea and allowing for the development of independent polities; on the other hand, the sea served as the crossroads of Europe, North Africa, and Asia, as the obvious connector of its coasts as well as the intermediary islands in between. David Abulafia and S. D. Goitein have emphasized the history of the Mediterranean, not in terms of the individual societies that developed around the sea, but rather in terms of "interactions across space," and the exchange of ideas and culture through movement across the sea.[11] As we shall see, during medieval times between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the major players included the Republic of Venice, Norman Sicily, Fatimid Egypt and North Africa, al-Andalus (Islamic Spain), and Byzantium. There was constant travel between these polities across the Mediterranean. Each of these centers was inhabited by a mix of populations of Jews, Muslims, and Christians who maintained networks of trading partners among coreligionists throughout the region, exchanging not only goods, but also ideas and texts. The constant traffic of peoples and goods proved an effective recipe for sustaining a fragile coexistence and a delicate balance of power. Furthermore, the Mediterranean provided expanded possibilities for exchange well beyond its shores, through connecting bodies of water that formed their own networks of exchange as well as passageways for the Mediterranean itself. Some, such as the Adriatic or Aegean Seas, were nearby, while others, such as the Black Sea, which connected the Mediterranean to Eastern Europe and the Steppes, were more distant; David Abulafia has posited other "mediterraneans," that expand the Mediterranean exchange network even further.[12]

The Mediterranean, at the nexus of three continents, Europe, Asia, and Africa, was the perfect medium to stimulate these complex intersections and continuities. Like the Mediterranean, where communities of Jews, Christians, and Muslims exchanged ideas and goods in such centers as Cairo, Palermo, and Cordoba, this volume serves as a meeting point for writings on art and culture across the disciplinary boundaries of late antique, Byzantine, Islamic, Norman, and Venetian arts, to name a few.

The essays here have been chosen not only because they represent material related to each of these fields, but also because they bring to life the complex visual intersections and formations that took place across the religious and political boundaries of the Mediterranean in European, Islamic, and Byzantine realms. To be sure, individual visual and cultural distinctions existed among these spheres and these, as well as cultural transformations and changes, will be addressed here also. Yet despite the emergence of clear and distinct individual identity, the remapping here speaks to the permeability of boundaries in the Mediterranean. It is my contention, furthermore, that the parameters chosen here not only allow for a contextualization of a shared Mediterranean culture, but also allow us to sharpen our focus on each of the individual cultures.

An important aspect of this anthology is the inclusion of earlier "classic" writings. These texts remain important touchstones as pioneering contributions, both in their approaches and interpretation, even if a few points of information in these works might warrant modification. They help to create a dialog with more recent works, offering opportunities for comparison, but also serving as foundations for the discourse of continuities and cultural interaction. Most of these articles dispel widely held misconceptions, such as the prohibition of figural images in Jewish and Islamic art (Parts I and III). All of the texts chosen demonstrate an awareness of and sensitivity to wider social and cultural contexts. They deal with major issues and pose questions about the complexities of functions and meanings of art, and how identity is expressed visually. In particular, I have selected articles that employ global and interdisciplinary approaches, as I believe these approaches deepen our understanding as well as make the material more accessible and relevant to the way we study art and history today.

The material is organized both thematically and in a general chronology, in order to accommodate the needs of university courses and a range of approaches. At the same time, the headings suggest pedagogical direction and inquiry. I have used these texts in my own classes, with positive reception from my students, whom I would like to acknowledge. Of course, there are many other possibilities and the texts presented here do not represent any definitive selections. What this volume will provide is access to a body of material that will inspire thinking across periods, cultures, and disciplines. My hope is that it will serve as a launching pad for a holistic study of medieval art in the Mediterranean and will encourage readers to seek out relationships and connections beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Part I focuses on the art of late antiquity, from the third to the seventh centuries, and includes articles on pagan, Jewish, and Sasanian art. Individually, as well as collectively, these articles demonstrate a shared late antique visual language and exchange in the context of a multiplicity and diversity of cultures and religious cults. In his essay, Jás Elsner puts to rest, once and for all, the idea of decline and the conventional boundaries between Roman art and late antique art. He defines the scope of late antique art, not only through its continuities with the Roman art of the past but also through its links to the Christian art of the future. Annabel Jane Wharton focuses our attention on the wall paintings of the synagogue at Dura Europos, arguably the largest surviving above-ground program of late antique wall painting from the third century CE. In so doing, she situates this Jewish monument into the central discussion of the art of late antiquity, dispels notions of the absence of figural imagery in Jewish art, and explains the politics of the obscurity of this work. She also explores its complex relationships to both Persian art (Parthian and Sasanian art) and early Christian art, and analyzes its visual discourse in terms of its particular Jewish identity. The essays by Anna Gonosová and Richard Ettinghausen bring Sasanian art into the discussion of late antique art. Both articles demonstrate a shared visual vocabulary between the Roman and Sasanian world, and the need to consider art beyond the Mediterranean borders. Anna Gonosová provides a concise summary of Sasanian art and the issues of exchange with the Mediterranean world. Ettinghausen's essay is a case study. When he wrote his essay in the 1970s, the terminology of "influences" and "borrowings" was commonly used. Today we would judiciously avoid these terms because of the imbalanced power relations implied between the Greco-Roman "lender" and Sasanian "recipient." We speak, instead, in terms of coeval reciprocal "interactions." Nevertheless, Ettinghausen's engagement with the process of cultural translation, a mainstay of this volume, may be brought into dialog with the texts in Part II.

Part II continues to engage with processes of continuities and cultural translations. In "The Good Life," Henry Maguire explores the interchangeability of propitious visual themes among pagans, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Similarly, G. W. Bowersock explores continuities of Hellenism on the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Jordan, drawing on visual evidence of paintings and mosaics discovered in excavations since the 1980s. Both Maguire and Bowersock emphasize that not all adaptations of Greco-Roman vocabulary are the same. What is important is how this vocabulary is used in their new contexts and in the formation of new cultural identities. Another theme in Part II is the status of textiles, discussed by Maguire in the context of its function in late antiquity, and then by Lisa Golombek, in her fascinating analysis of the "textile mentality" and its central role in Islamic art and its permeation throughout Islamic society. The possibilities of intermedia exchange are creatively explored here.

Part III examines the visual representation of the holy in the European Christian, Byzantine, and Islamic spheres. The intention is that the explanations of religious imagery in these essays be considered in dialog. These writings explore the devotion of visual images known as icons, the relationship of visual images to scripture, and the use of figural and non-figural images. These articles will also dispel a number of misconceptions relating to the prohibition of images in

Islam (parallel to the misconception relating to Jewish art as discussed in Part I) and the role of Islam in Iconoclasm (the destruction of images). Most of all, the articles here contextualize Mediterranean Muslim and Christian attitudes, so that they are not reduced to simple binaries.

To begin this part of the book, John Lowden brings a fresh perspective to the old question of the origin and role of visual images in early Christian bibles. In "Sacred Image, Sacred Power," Gary Vikan explains the critical role of an icon as "a window or door *through* which the worshipper gains access to sanctity," an understanding that has largely been lost by contemporary viewers. "What defined an icon in Byzantium was neither medium nor style, but rather how the image was used, and especially, what people believed it to be." Perception is what created its aura and, at the same time, made icons so threatening that eventually they would be banned and destroyed during the period of Byzantine Iconoclasm (725–80 CE and 814–43 CE).

Focusing on the dialog between early Islam and Byzantium, the essays by Oleg Grabar, Erica Dodd, and G. R. D. King demonstrate the role of visual imagery in formulating religious and cultural identity in the early medieval Mediterranean world. The articles by Oleg Grabar and G. R. D. King point to visual imagery as a weapon in the battle for the holy sphere, used by both Muslims and Christians to assert their doctrine and to refute the offensive doctrine of the other. The anti-Trinitarian message in the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock responded to the Christian claim of the divinity of Jesus, while the Christians, as King notes, counterclaimed, with their crucifix which was "more objectionable to the Muslims than any picture." And finally, the coinage reform by ʻAbd al-Malik asserts the message of the unity of God, once again, refuting the legitimacy of the Christian Trinity. In all of this, it is the shared Mediterranean background that made it possible for these visual polemics to be comprehensible to both sides of the Christian/Muslim debate. In her classic article, Erica Dodd explains the shared Mediterranean philosophical and theological foundations for the development and expression of attitudes toward figural and non-figural images in Jewish, Islamic, and Byzantine spheres. Ultimately, the choices of imagery that would be made by the Christians and the Muslims related to the needs of each faith and culture.

Part IV explores the art of minority cultures, the indigenous Jewish and Christian cultures in Islamic lands, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Robert Nelson and Rachel Milstein demonstrate the virtues of closely focused study on individual works, in providing insights into context and identity and in opening up a range of visual connections. The authors have both pointed to the strong relationships between the works serving the sacred realms of these minority communities and the works from the broader Islamic culture at large. What can this tell us about the status of these minority cultures? To what extent can works like these be labeled as "minority art," and how can we define the balance between ethnic/religious identity and broader cultural identity? Robert Nelson questions the usefulness of the labels "Muslim" and "Christian" altogether.

Part V considers the luxury arts and the paradigm of the Byzantine court between the tenth and twelfth centuries. On the surface this may seem like a straightforward unproblematic category, but these essays raise questions about authority, tradition, and the category and function of "art" at the highest level of production and patronage. Henry Maguire and Robin Cormack demonstrate how the Byzantine court projected its own flattering image and how it communicated with its ruling counterparts in other polities, through a system of shared but controlled imagery. In the "Image of the Court," Maguire illustrates the image of *taxis* (harmonious order) at the court through the rigid and minute construction of the person of the emperor and the orchestration of an elaborately encoded system of hierarchies, whereby the emperor is positioned as the earthly counterpart to Christ. Robin Cormack explores the extension of court hierarchy beyond the Byzantine sphere and the potential of art to affect diplomacy and politics. Ioli Kalavrezou focuses on a single celebrated luxury object, the so-called "San Marco Cup," to dismantle the long-standing theory of the revival of art from classical antiquity to explain the appearance of mythological subjects on luxury secular art. In so doing, Kalavrezou opens up the possibility for more flexible "divergent styles" of fashionable luxury objects, that included ancient mythological representations as well as others, such as pseudo-kufic script, making visual connections with the Islamic realm as well. The contact between Mediterranean courts is further explored in Part VI.

Part VI focuses on visual and cultural exchange in the Mediterranean between the tenth through thirteenth centuries. The essays chosen focus on three critical sites of cultural intersection: Islamic Spain, Norman Sicily, and the Republic of Venice. While each individual site was home to a mix of populations representing the ethnic and religious peoples of all the other Mediterranean centers, by grouping these sites together, I wish to raise the possibilities for broader interchange among these spheres in defining a shared culture. When traveling anywhere within the Mediterranean, S. D. Goitein noted that "one was, so to speak, within one's own precincts." If indeed, we can speak of a "Mediterranean Society," as Goitein suggested, how did this network of cultures work, and what can their art tell us about the relationship between these centers? And how was it possible to negotiate the complexities of local and regional identities and meanings? In "Pathways of Portability," I argue that, visually, it was the portable works in circulation that defined their familiar surroundings and imparted the "Mediterranean" feeling and look. The key to understanding portable works in all of these centers is not necessarily through the identification of specific localization where objects were made, but through the study of the arenas in which these works were circulated and viewed. Jerrilynn Dodds points out that, in Spain, the appropriation of Islamic art by the Christian conquerors could carry meanings of both triumph and admiration. In the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, William Tronzo argues that the choice of "Islamic" or "Byzantine" modes of decoration depended on how these visual motifs were used within the Norman context. Deborah Howard suggests that the use of "Islamic" motifs in Venetian architecture speaks to a number of possible associations: The ever-present mindfulness of the Holy Land in the context of the Crusades; the admiration of Islamic art and architecture; and last but not least, the assertion of Venice as the greatest trading capital of the world.

Notes

1 Beginning with Peter R. L. Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971). Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity,* AD *395–600* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); *Late Antique. A Guide to the Postclassical World,* ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), with full bibliography.

2 Garth Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Michele Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman, Jordan: American Center of Oriental Research, 1993).

3 *Late Antique. A Guide*, xi.

4 Among these are Robert Nelson, "Living on the Byzantine borders of Western art," *Gesta* 35, No. 1 (1996), pp. 3–11; Herbert Kessler, "On the state of medieval art history," *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988) pp. 166–87; and *Reading Medieval Images. The Art Historian and the Object*, ed. Elizabeth Sears and Thelma K. Thomas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

5 Herbert Kessler, "State of medieval art," p. 168.

6 Nelson, "Byzantine borders," p. 8.

7 Geoffrey Rickman, "The creation of Mare Nostrum: 300–500 AD," in *The Mediterranean in History*, ed. David Abulafia (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), pp. 127–53. The Romans called the Mediterranean the "Great Sea," around which their world quite clearly and literally revolved. It was also known more intimately as "Mare Nostrum" – our sea.

8 Klavs Randsborg, *The First Millennium A.D. in Europe and the Mediterranean: An Archaeological Essay* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

9 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, translated from French by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

10 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

11 Abulafia, "Introduction," *Mediterranean in History*, pp. 11–27 and S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society; The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–93).

12 Abulafia, pp. 17–18.

Part I

Late Antiquity: Converging Cultures, Competing Traditions. Pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Sasanian Art

1

The Changing Nature of Roman Art and the Art-Historical Problem of Style

Jás Elsner

This article explores the way art both reflected and helped precipitate the cultural changes of the Roman world. Moving from a period of political stability to one of greater uncertainty, from the supreme self-confidence of the imperial establishment during the Second Sophistic to the religious conversion of late antiquity, we will observe the functions, forms and transformations in visual images – in their uses, their appearance, and their scope. One, perhaps surprising, element in the story – given the tremendous changes in the period – is how much, especially in the imagery and social functions of art, proclaimed continuity. The stylistic and thematic eclecticism, the veneration for the classical arts of the past, and even many pervasive visual motifs (from the arena to pagan mythology, from hunting to the illustration of literary themes) – all these characteristics of second-century art are equally true of the arts of the Christian fourth and fifth centuries, despite the changes of meaning and emphasis which some of these motifs underwent.

Usually the story of Roman art in late antiquity is told as the narrative of a radical transformation in the *forms* and *style* of visual images. The period with which this study opens produced some of the greatest and most influential masterpieces of naturalistic sculpture which have survived from antiquity. It was by such magnificent marble statues as the Apollo Belvedere (probably made in the first third of the second century AD, or the Capitoline Venus (dating also

Jás Elsner, “The Changing Nature of Roman Art and the Art-Historical Problem of Style,” pp. 15–23 from *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Copyright © 1998 by Jás Elsner. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

from the mid-second century) that the Renaissance's love affair with naturalism was inspired. The Apollo Belvedere, probably a copy of a bronze original by Leochares of the fourth century BC, was one of the most celebrated and influential of all Classical sculptures during the Renaissance. After its discovery (sometime in the later fifteenth century), it found its way by 1509 into the papal collections, where it remained one of the prize exhibits in the Belvedere courtyard of the Vatican. It was through such images that the history of the rise of classical naturalism has been written. There were other supremely skilful variations on and creative copies of great sculptures made by Greek artists, like Leochares or Praxiteles, in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Likewise our period saw the creation of some of the most magnificent 'baroque' sculptures of the Roman period – for instance, the Farnese Hercules, itself a version of a famous statue by the fourth-century Greek artist Lysippus, or the Farnese Bull (both from the early third century AD, and found in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome) – spectacular carvings which played with the full scope of naturalistic imagery, extending its limits to flamboyant and 'mannerist' effect.

Yet, by the fourth century AD, the outstanding classical heritage of the arts which imitated nature and created an impression of lifelike realism began to be replaced by non-naturalistic modes of representation. For example, compare the roundel of the emperor Hadrian sacrificing to the goddess Diana (Figure 1.1), originally carved for a public monument in the AD 130s (about the same time as the Apollo Belvedere) and later incorporated in the Arch of Constantine, with the bas-relief frieze of the emperor Constantine addressing the Roman people from the rostra in the Roman forum, sculpted for the Arch of Constantine nearly 200 years later (Figure 1.2). Both scenes are symmetrical compositions, but note the spatial illusionism of the Hadrianic tondo with its clear marking of foreground and background figures (Hadrian – whose face was later recut – on the viewer's right-hand side, stands in front of the statue of Diana with a cloaked attendant behind him to the right). The draperies of the figures on the tondo fall naturalistically about their bodies giving an illusion of volume and mass, of limbs and space. The plinth of the cult statue, which is placed in the open in front of a tree, is itself offset at an angle, giving an impression of perspective which is reinforced by the disposition of the figures.

By contrast, the Constantinian *adlocutio* (or address to the populace) has eschewed all the visual conventions of illusionistic space and perspectival naturalism so elegantly embodied by the roundel. Background is indicated simply by placing a row of equal-sized heads above the foreground figures, who stand in a line with little hint of naturalistic poise or posture. Draperies, far from exposing the forms of the bodies beneath them, are rendered as drill lines incised into the flat surface: they stand as a sign for clothing but they neither imitate real dress, nor emphasize the physical volumes of the bodies they clothe. There is no sense of perspective, just a flat surface with the most important figures clustered on the raised podium around the emperor, who stands beneath two banners at the centre. In the Hadrianic tondo, the statue is obviously a statue –

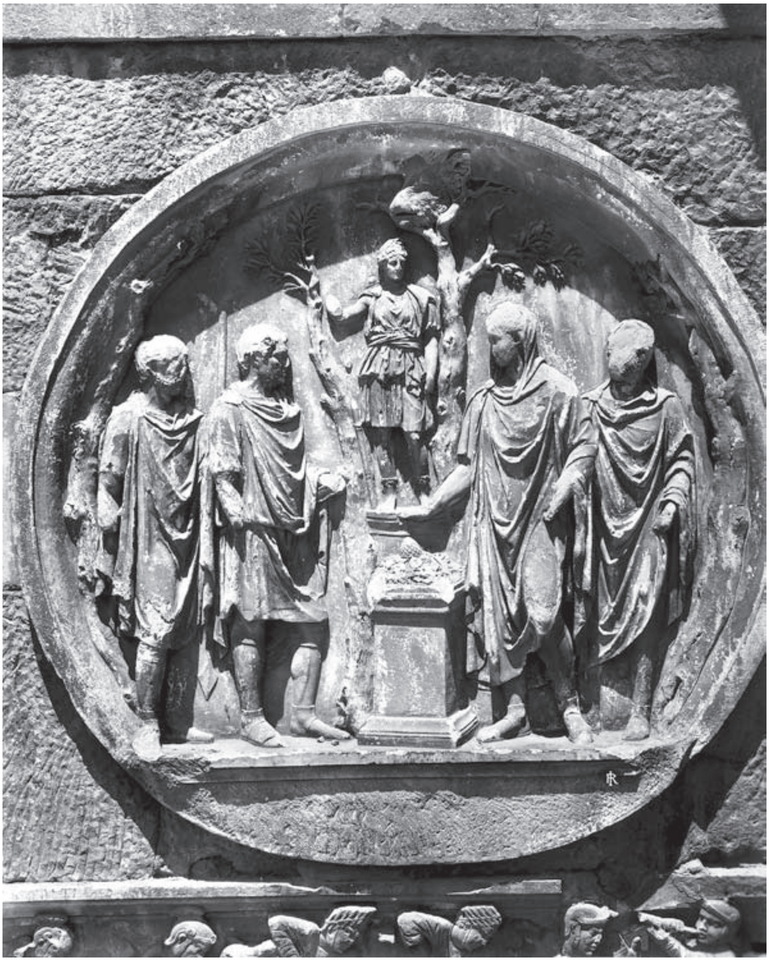

Figure 1.1 One of eight marble roundels depicting Hadrian hunting, executed in the 130s and subsequently incorporated into the Arch of Constantine. The series of eight combines a celebration of hunting (an activity for which Hadrian was famous) with a focus on piety and the careful rendering of a rustic setting. Four of the eight scenes depict the act of sacrifice at an altar before the statue of a deity. In this relief (from the south side of the Arch of Constantine), Hadrian, the first figure on the right-hand side, pours a libation to the goddess Diana. Alinari Archives, Florence

differentiated in scale from the other figures and placed on a plinth. By contrast, the two seated figures to either side of the rostra in the *adlocutio* relief are not obviously different from the other figures, yet they represent not human figures but *statues* of Constantine's deified predecessors, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. The fact that the three highest figures in the relief are Constantine (had his head survived) and the two deceased emperors, works to make the political point that

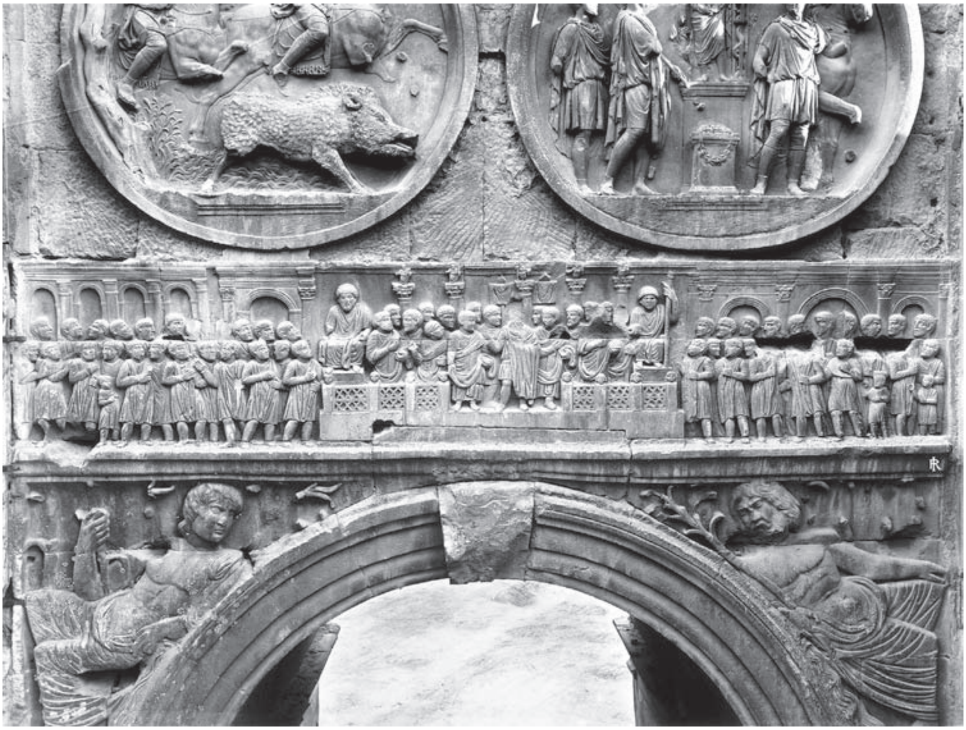

Figure 1.2 *Adlocutio* relief, *c.*315, from the Arch of Constantine, showing the emperor addressing the people. This image is famous for its intimations of late-antique style, including centralizing symmetry, the frontality of the emperor, the stacking of figures, and the elimination of illusionism in depicting space. The setting is the Roman forum. Constantine speaks from the rostra. Behind are the five columns of Diocletian's *decennial* monument, of AD 303, crowned with statues of the four tetrarchs and Jupiter in the center (beneath whom Constantine stands). To the right is the Arch of Septimius Severus (erected in 203); to the left, the arcades of the Basilica Julia and the single bay of the Arch of Tiberius, both now lost. Alinari Archives, Florence

Constantine is their successor, even their embodiment. Both reliefs were displayed together as part of the same monument during the Constantinian period (and thereafter), as the Hadrianic tondo was incorporated into the decoration of the Arch of Constantine in Rome. The tondo (one of eight), with Hadrian's head recut to resemble Constantine or his father Constantius Chlorus, as well as other sculptures from monuments of Marcus Aurelius and Trajan, became part of a complex visual politics designed to legitimate Constantine in relation to the great emperors of the second century.

The arts of the late third and the fourth centuries – not only political images like those on the Arch of Constantine, but also (perhaps especially) the sacred arts – were the crucible in which the more 'abstract' forms of medieval image-making were created. The great variety in the visual forms of the arts in late antiquity makes our period simultaneously the ancestor of medieval and Byzantine art on the one hand, and of the Renaissance (which replaced and rejected medieval styles of image-making) on the other. Indeed, the juxtaposition of styles in the reliefs of the Arch of Constantine proved a principal basis for the Renaissance's formulation of artistic 'decline' in late antiquity in the writings of Raphael and Vasari. One of our difficulties as students of the period is that we approach it, inevitably, with preconceptions formulated by the kinds of more recent art we ourselves may enjoy: medieval 'symbolism', Renaissance and post-Renaissance 'naturalism', modernist 'abstraction' and 'expressionism', post-modernist 'eclecticism'. One of the riches of the Roman imperial art explored here is that not only did it have elements of all these qualities, but it is in many ways their direct ancestor.

The stylistic challenge of the juxtapositions of the reliefs on the Arch of Constantine has led scholars in a search through the history of Roman art to explain how and when the Classical conventions governing representations like the Hadrianic tondo gave way to the proto-medievalism of the Constantinian frieze. In many ways the history of late-Roman art has become a quest for the first moment of decline. Among the candidates have been the arts of the Severan period (193–235), those of the Antonine dynasty (in particular, reliefs and sarcophagi from the reigns of Marcus Aurelius, 161–80, and Commodus, 180–92), and even earlier art from the lower classes, like the remarkable Trajanic circus relief from Ostia. The overwhelming burden of this stylistic story has been a narrative of incremental decline, leading to radical change. It has married perfectly with the traditional and oversimplified historical picture of crisis in the third century followed by the end of Classical antiquity and the onset of the Christian middle ages. Both history and art history have insisted on change, and both have seen formal structure (whether the stylistic forms of images or the administrative ordering of the empire) as responses to a social and stylistic crisis.

However, to examine the visual material with such a strong emphasis on stylistic change has led to a number of errors, or at least overexaggerations. First, the transformation from the illusionistic arts of the second century (and before) to the symbolic arts of late antiquity has invariably been represented as 'decline': decline from the hard-won naturalism of Greek classicism into hierarchic images that no longer imitate what they represent but rather gesture toward their meaning as signs or symbols; decline from the elegant illusionistic evocation of space and perspective in the Hadrianic tondi to the flat surfaces, the stacked, ill-proportioned, and schematically realized figures of the Constantinian friezes. Yet 'decline' is a modern value judgement (specifically a post-Renaissance posture) revealing a particular strand of modern prejudice (or 'taste') – it certainly does not reflect how the Roman world saw its image-making at the time. On the contrary, the designers of the Arch of Constantine appear to have been quite happy to juxtapose images which are stylistically contrasting, even jarring, to modern eyes. Second, while it is true that the Constantinian *adlocutio* relief was an affirmation of an hierarchic and ritualized vision of empire (looking back in visual terms beyond the relatively abstract arts of the tetrarchs as far as the frontal portrayals of the emperor on the column of Marcus Aurelius and in Severan times), it is impossible to demonstrate that any apparent break in visual forms was dependent on any simple or wholesale change in social structures. True, the whole period from the later second century to the fifth was one in which very profound changes took place; but it was a slow and incremental process lasting several centuries.

Third, the selection of objects for stylistic comparison is always dangerously arbitrary. Had the designers of the Arch of Constantine chosen a different series of second- and fourth-century objects for their juxtapositions, the Arch would have occasioned far less scandal in later centuries. Take, for instance, one of the two *decursio* scenes from the base of the column dedicated by the co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus in AD 161 to the memory of their deified predecessor Antoninus Pius. Although its small figures are rendered realistically enough, this sculpture – which represents one of the rituals at Antoninus' funeral and deification – ignores the classicizing illusions of perspective and space characteristic of most contemporary sculpture in order to give a rather more schematic rendering of a sacred ceremony. The galloping figures and the standard-bearers around whom the horsemen ride are seen, as a composition, from above (a bird's-eye view, as it were), but each figure is carved as if we were looking at it from ground level. The sense of encirclement is achieved, not by illusionism, but by the stacking of rows of figures. There is a fundamental discrepancy (from the naturalistic point of view) between the compositional arrangement – which demands that we be shown only the tops of the riders' heads, since we are looking down from a height – and the depiction of the figures, which would suggest that all three rows should be shown in a single plane. Compare this scene with the fourth-century porphyry sarcophagus of St Helena, mother of Constantine, discovered in the remains of her mausoleum in Rome and depicting the triumph of Roman soldiers over barbarians. Despite the fact that it was much restored in the eighteenth century, the sculpture of this object – with its realistic figures but non-illusionistic spatial and perspectival field – is close to the spirit of the Antonine column base. Even the military subject matter and the penchant for stacking rows of figures against an undetermined background is similar in both sculptures. Had carvings like these been juxtaposed on the Arch of Constantine, we might never have imagined them to be over 150 years apart. Beside other, much more coherently naturalistic, Antonine works – including the famous relief of imperial apotheosis carved for the very same column base from the very same block of stone possibly by the very same artists – the *decursio* panel looks decidedly out of place, if one uses purely stylistic criteria for judgement. Beside the *adlocutio* relief of the Arch of Constantine, the sarcophagus of Helena looks intensely classicizing. Clearly there was a great deal more stylistic variation within the arts of any particular moment in our period – even in objects produced specifically for the imperial centre at Rome – than any straightforward stylistic comparisons of single objects will allow.

Another approach to the arts of late antiquity – that espoused traditionally by historians of early Christian and Byzantine art – has been to see them teleologically, with the visual changes as part of a wider cultural process which led naturally to the triumph of Christianity and Christian art. To some extent, of course, this is valid as a retrospective way of looking at the material: by (say) the eighth century AD pretty well all pagan themes and naturalistic forms had been extirpated from the canon of visual production. However, the triumph of Christianity (indeed, even its very theological definition) was too haphazard and uncertain, at least in the fourth century, for any attempt to eradicate classicism. Indeed, well beyond our period – into the sixth and seventh centuries – there was a flourishing production of pagan imagery and naturalistic styles on the textiles and silverware used not only by isolated pagan groups in the peripheries of the empire, but even by the imperial Christian court at Constantinople. Also, it was not just Christian art, but also the arts of other mystical or initiate sects in the period before Constantine's legalization of Christianity which encouraged increasing (non-naturalistic) symbolism; and it was pre-Christian imperial art – the art of the tetrarchic emperors of the late third century AD – which imposed the first systematically simplified and schematized forms on the visual propaganda of the Roman world.

My own approach in this article, signalled by choosing the dates with which it starts and ends, is twofold. First, I reject the notion of decline. There are obvious changes between AD 100 and 450 in the styles and techniques used for art, as well as in the kinds of objects produced (for example, late antiquity saw a rise and rapid development in the art of high-quality ivory carving). But there are also profound continuities between the visual productions of the pagan and Christian empires. Take, for example, the beautiful gold-glass medallion from Brescia, which could have been made at any point in our period – its transfixing naturalism gestures towards the second century, while its technique is more typical of objects from the fourth (Figure 1.3). Perhaps from Alexandria, since its inscription is in the Alexandrian dialect of Greek, it probably found its way early to Italy – at any rate, it was incorporated there in the seventh century in a ceremonial, jewelled, cross. Whenever it was made, and for the duration of its use in antiquity, the imagery of this gem speaks of the continuity and values of family life, of the wealth and patronage of aristocratic élites, of the high value placed on exquisite workmanship from the second century to the fifth.

Second, I have ignored the historiographic divide (virtually a wall of non-communication) between those who write about 'late-antique art' from the point of view of the Classical heritage and those who write about 'early Christian art' from the stance of its medieval and Byzantine inheritance. While the dichotomy is understandable – given the different trainings and expectations with which its upholders were educated – it is, quite simply, false. There was a multiplicity of

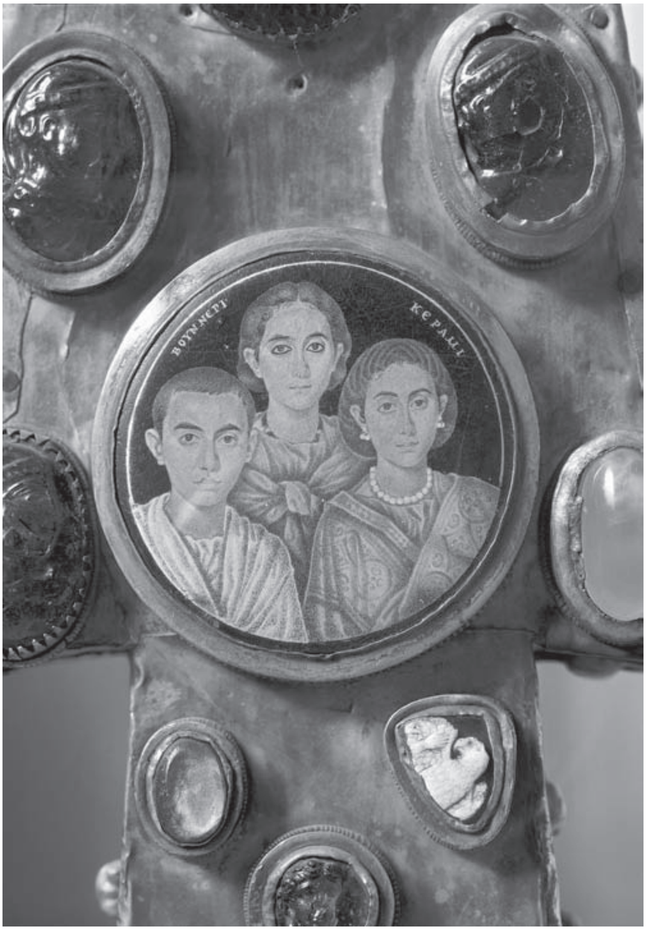

Figure 1.3 Cross of Galla Placidia (called "Desiderio"); detail showing gold-glass medallion of a family group, perhaps from Alexandria, dated anywhere between the early third and the mid-fifth centuries AD. This family group of a mother, in a richly embroidered robe and jewels, with her son and daughter, bears the inscription BOUNNERI KERAMI. This may be an artist's signature or the name of the family represented. Brescia, Museo Civico dell'Età Cristiana. © 1990. Photo Scala, Florence

cultures in the world of the later Roman empire which – far from being exclusive – saw themselves (especially after the legalization of Christianity) as part of a single political entity. The arts of that world were inextricably interrelated. If I have one overriding aim, it is to show how early Christian art was fully part of late antiquity, how – for all its special features – it developed out of, and reacted to, the public and private, religious and secular, visual culture of the later Roman empire.

2

Good and Bad Images from the Synagogue of Dura Europos: Contexts, Subtexts, Intertexts

Annabel Jane Wharton

Historiography of Absence[1]

In the case of certain icons, mechanical reproduction does not diminish effectivity.[2] The miraculous weeping image of Our Lady of Chicago in the St Nikolaos Albanian Orthodox Church has a number of equally lachrymose copies. Photographs and postcards of the miraculous image are empowered to weep by being touched by swabs taken from the tears of the original Virgin in Chicago.[3] Reproductions of the Mona Lisa, in so far as they refer to The Great Artwork, are apparently effective whatever the quality of the copy. . . . Certainly, most images lose their aura in reproduction. However, beautiful reproductions help ease the absence of the artefact; at least a nostalgia for originality clings to a wonderful copy. Equally, a terrible facsimile is likely to corrode the quality of the original and consequently to inhibit attendance to it. These are the familiar reasons why art historians take the reproduction of their objects of study very seriously.[4] Good plates are absent from this piece. The first part of my paper considers the politics and ideology of this lack.[5] The second section attempts to fill the gap between bad reproductions and interesting originals with some words.

The site of my subject is Dura Europos, an ancient city located in north-east Syria.[6] No single site provides more material evidence about the diversity of

Annabel Jane Wharton, "Good and Bad Images from the Synagogue of Dura Europos: contexts, subtexts, intertexts," pp. 1–25 from *Art History* 17:1 (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, March 1994). Copyright © 1994 by Association of Art Historians. Reprinted by permission of Blackwell Publishing.

religious expression in late Antiquity than does Dura Europos. Among the large number of monuments unearthed there are several temples, a mithraeum, a large synagogue and the earliest known, securely dated Christian building, all retaining remarkable fresco decoration. Europos, a Hellenistic foundation of around 300 BCE, and known as Dura by the third century CE, occupied a strategic position on a bluff overlooking the alluvial plain of the middle Euphrates. From the late second century BCE to the early second century CE, the city was an important political centre of the Parthian Empire. The province of Parapotamia was probably governed by the *strategos* of Dura. With the expansion of the Roman Empire in the West, the city came within a zone of hostile contention. In 116–17, and again from 165 to 256 CE, the Romans occupied the city; during the Roman occupation a *dux*, described as the commander of the Euphrates limes and probably also the civil governor of the Middle Euphrates, resided in the city.[7] In 256, after a siege that is remarkably well documented in the archaeological residue of Dura, the Sasanians conquered the city and apparently dispersed its populace.

Dura remained unmolested until March 1920, when British troops reported the discovery of well-preserved frescoes.[8] Shortly thereafter, on 3 May 1920, a one-day excavation was undertaken by James Henry Breasted, director of the newly founded Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. During the course of that day the frescoes of the Temple of Bel were completely unearthed and photographed. The 1,500-year-old paintings, left without adequate cover, were subsequently largely obliterated.[9] This act of historical sabotage was then published under the title *The Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Art*.[10] This book and the history of Dura's subsequent excavation, written by their overseer Clark Hopkins, indicate how the frescoes of Dura were effaced by what has been named 'Orientalism'.[11]

The preface of *The Oriental Forerunners* offers as clear a demonstration of Orientalism as any found in Edward Said's various presentations of the subject.[12]

> The region to which the Oriental Institute proposes to devote its chief attention is commonly called the Near East, by which we mean the eastern Mediterranean world and the adjacent regions eastward, at least through Persia. It is now quite evident that civilization arose in this region and passed thence to Europe. In the broadest general terms, therefore, the task of the Oriental Institute is the study of the origins of civilization, the history of the earliest civilized societies, the transition of civilization to Europe, and the relations of the Orient to the great civilizations of Europe after the cultural leadership of the world had passed from the Orient to European peoples.[13]

The East is presented as important in so far as it was the originating source of the superior Western culture which superseded it. The Roman imperial past is re-read in terms of the Western colonial present. Hopkins writes:

> In ancient times *also* the foreigners came to rule, first Greeks, then Parthians, Romans, and Sasanians. The local people of Dura, then as now, came out of the desert with their primal desert ways and accepted the technical culture of the foreigners and wondered at it, much as the contemporary Arab views the extraordinary achievements of European cultures. . . . The modern Arab renaissance doubtless will derive tremendous advantages from the European impact, but the old conservative language, religion and tradition still will dominate.[14]

The political message encoded in such a construction of culture is repeated and amplified in the text's plates, which purvey a sense of hostility and remoteness. The exotic East, which is static, immutable and primitive, is finally subject to the West, which introduces progress.

Breasted and Hopkins represented Dura as a remote desert frontier post.[15] 'Buried in the heart of the Syrian desert', writes Breasted on page one of his book. The agonistic isolation with which Dura was represented in these literary and visual images has framed subsequent scholarly and popular characterizations of Dura. The site is almost inevitably rendered as 'a small Roman garrison in Mesopotamia' or 'a Roman frontier station'.[16] Joseph Gutmann quite rightly states that it is 'shared opinion' that 'Dura was not an intellectual centre, but an undistinguished frontier town whose Roman garrison was posted there to stave off a Sasanian attack.'[17] But the image of Dura as a desert Roman outpost in antiquity is deceptive. Dura is not *in* the desert; it is sited directly above the luxuriant alluvial plain of the River Euphrates, a central trading position in the heart of one of the richest agricultural areas in the ancient world.[18] Nor, for most of its existence, was Dura either Roman or a frontier town. At least by some accounts it was a middle-sized city, similar in scale to Priene.[19] It was Roman for less than a century, during which time it was the residence of the *dux* of the limes; before that the Parthian governor of Mesopotamia was situated there. Dura's characterization as a frontier station continues the early twentieth century's reading of the present into the past. Although Dura was not marginal in antiquity, it was in the 1920s. After World War I this part of Mesopotamia lay between the French and English protectorates in an area still contested by the Arabs. In other words, the representation of the city as marginal is historiographically conditioned.

Dura's artworks are seriously compromised by the Orientalist understanding of the site's location as liminal. Art historians of the later twentieth century who are not obviously implicated in colonialism have continued to treat Dura's paintings, *as a matter of habit*, as the unimaginative production of the periphery: traditionless, derivative, homogenized by their lack of quality. Or, as one scholar put it: 'As is to be expected in a garrison town located on a frontier, the paintings show both an eclecticism of subject and style, and a provincialism manifested in the generally mediocre level of execution.'[20] This point is important: the absence of good-quality reproductions of the frescoes of Dura is excused by the aesthetic unimportance of the original. Simultaneously, this lack of good reproductions makes negative assessments of the monuments of Dura apparently true. Each of the monuments of Dura has its own particular set of explanations – involving Orientalism and other academic practices – for an unavailability of adequate reproduction. In this piece I want to address in greater detail how politics erased one particular set of photographs: those of the Dura Synagogue.[21]

The most immediate reason why good reproductions of the Dura Synagogue are not present in this article is that I was not allowed to photograph them. The frescoes are presently installed in a full-scale reconstruction of the synagogue in the National Museum in Damascus. Last Spring I was given permission to photograph anything in the Museum, except the Synagogue frescoes. Such a denial could, of course, be ascribed to the micropolitics of institutions with which all art historians are familiar. However, I think that this instance of veiled images is more likely attributable to the macropolitics of the state. Though accessible upon request, the presence of the Synagogue frescoes in the museum is nowhere announced. Even in foreign guide books, the Synagogue itself is censored in the plans of the museum's galleries. There are good reasons for this. The Israelis and Syrians have been in a state of war since Israel was introduced in the East by the West in 1948. Consequently, Jewish production is not celebrated in Syria. The frescoes' lack of presence might even be said to protect them from assault. After all, they can be seen, if not photographed. It should be pointed out that these images have been maintained in Damascus in a way that the frescoes of the Christian building, shipped by the excavators to Yale, have not. Those works, in contrast to the paintings of the Synagogue, can be photographed but not seen; like the frescoes of the Temple of Bel, they are virtually destroyed.[22]

There are more subtle (though no less political) reasons for the unavailability of good reproductions of the Synagogue paintings. The elaborate narrative programme of decoration of the synagogue was painted probably in 244–5 CE, buried in 256, excavated in 1932 and published in 1933 (an inauspicious moment for things Jewish). The Synagogue programme – one of the most extensive painting cycles salvaged from antiquity – disturbed received Western wisdom in a way few other archaeological discoveries have: the paintings protest the construction of Jews as aniconic and non-visual. These images threaten the neat, nineteenth-century formulation, still very much with us, of the Jews (the East) as verbal and abstract and the Greeks (the West) as visual and figural.[23] The Synagogue paintings unsettle traditional notions central to the ordering of the 'Judeo-Christian tradition'. This familiar construction is ideologically loaded, as Daniel Boyarin's criticism of the term suggests:

> The liberal term 'Judaeo-Christian' (*sic*) masks a suppression of that which is distinctly Jewish. It means 'Christian', and by not even acknowledging that much, renders the suppression of Jewish discourse even more complete. It is as if the classical Christian ideology – according to which Judaism went out of existence with the coming of Christ, and the Jews are doomed to anachronism by their refusal to accept the truth – were recast in secular, anthropological terminology.[24]