



## 24.05.05 Chatterjee, Between the Pagan Past and Christian Present in Byzantine Visual Culture

Chatterjee, Paroma. *Between the Pagan Past and Christian Present in Byzantine Visual Culture: Statues in Constantinople, 4th-13th Centuries CE*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 267. \$99.99 (hardback). ISBN: 978-1-108-83358-5 (hardback).

Reviewed by:

**Andrea C. Snow**

Independent Scholar

andreacolinsnow@gmail.com

Antiquity left significant fingerprints across the Byzantine Empire. From physical sites such as urban spaces, civic structures, and their corresponding entrance gates, to the imaginative and syllogistic realms of novels and other literary forms, the past was spread ubiquitously across the present. In her second monograph, *Between the Pagan Past and Christian Present in Byzantine Visual Culture: Statues in Constantinople, 4th-13th Centuries CE*, Paroma Chatterjee sinuously foregrounds how the vestiges of pre-Christian culture--and particularly sculptural representations of mythic heroes and animals, as well as famed monuments from the empire's polytheistic history--resonated throughout the Constantinopolitan zeitgeist.

While scholarship has consistently addressed Byzantium's unsteady relationship with objects of Christian devotion, and particularly the lives and deaths of icons, Chatterjee takes interest in the under-discussed, but captivating roles that pagan statues occupied in the visual culture of the empire. Substituting a traditional Introduction with Chapter 1 (titled "The Byzantine Statue: Problems and Questions"), Chatterjee begins by outlining that pagan statues exacted "an enduring and crucial effect in the visual discourse" of Constantinople (33). She deftly points out to readers that, despite the sheer weight of research centering holy images, such artworks were not the sole constitutive parts of the empire's visual identity, and that at certain points in its history, pagan statues were perceived as carrying a cultural importance that was comparable, if not equal, to icons. This is a unique assertion, and it is satisfactorily explicated: the author is quick to clarify that while pagan statues were apprehended with proportional cultural significance, they departed from icons in that they inhabited a category of image that was "resistant to imperial control and interference" (39). She outlines that Christian images were explicitly tied to constructs of power and easily interpreted by imperial authorities, but pagan statues were tethered to more amorphous structures--those of thought.

Building from these claims, Chatterjee's study aims to foreground the conversations that pagan statues stimulated among themselves, other media forms, and shifting conventions of viewership across the period. Particular interest is paid to literature, the various genres of which serve as her objects of investigation. These resources are plentiful in their discussions of pagan statuary and, importantly, are also the sole spaces in which it survives after the Ottoman conquest of the fifteenth century. This lack of extant examples is one of several challenges that Chatterjee faces in carrying out such a study: the translation and dating of some of the texts to which she refers can be opaque, for example. And, further, the organization of the information mined from these capacious sources is a laborious endeavor--many themes and perspectives seem entangled with a rhizomatic intensity. Notwithstanding, the author presses that these examples address statues with consistency and precision, and she ties the circumstances made evident in the written word to pagan remains found in other sects of the Byzantine material corpus. These include imperial, Christian, and secular objects that feature pagan motifs, which are presented alongside an extremely cognizant awareness of literature's ability to shape the visual (and vice versa). A clear, conscientious route forward is quickly made visible.

[Skip to content](#)

In Chapter 2, "Prophecy," Chatterjee explores descriptions of events taking place at the Hippodrome as described in the *Parastaseis Syntomoi*, *Chronika*, and *Patria Konstantinpoleos*. A space in which the emperor's constructed glory directly faces the broader population, the

Hippodrome is framed as an arena wherein numerous sculptures could acceptably limit, critique, and subvert imperial dominance. Turning to a chapter from the *Parastaseis*, the author discusses Emperor Theodosius II's attempts to decipher the meanings of their forms. Vexed, he fails to interpret the statues before him and brings in an entourage of interpreters for assistance. Stressing the importance of looking, these wise men "posit the decipherment of the empire's history as being contingent on the ability to appraise and interpret visual evidence" (56). The events underscore the emperor's intellectual limitations and allude to his ineptitude as a ruler. If he cannot see what resides within the fragments of the past, he cannot understand, or lead, the entirety of the empire in the present. This treatment of statues as visual riddles that must be solved in order to arrive at their true meaning is an engrossing topic, and Chatterjee nourishes the reader's interest. Turning to the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry of Tyre's *On Statues*, she foregrounds that the conditions of Byzantine viewership were underwritten by an imperative to learn *how* to behold such objects, indicating that there is a hidden substance to be found within their forms. This conclusion is astute and, perhaps, generally applicable to human viewing habits, wherein examining statues remains a process of deductive reasoning.

Chatterjee's capacity to identify the significance of image reading as it is laid out in historical texts is impressive. It is followed by a fascinating (though brief) assertion: while contending with the visual legibility of statues could expose leaders and cause them great anguish, another aspect of experiencing them--bearing witness to their Otherness--could prophesize their inevitable ends. The *Patria Konstantinpoleos*, she argues, is painstaking about "noting the wide-ranging provenance" of the statues placed within the Hippodrome (86). Brought to the city from the eastern and western arms of the empire, and likely from outside of its boundaries, these statues are described as enchanted figures. When examined by an experienced viewer, they offer knowledge of the final days of the empire. Here, Chatterjee frames the temporal provocations of pagan statues as residing not only in their ability to reveal the faults of those in power, but also in their operation as intellectual devices through which the turning points of history could be discovered. The unraveling of such a multilayered, enigmatic reading is extraordinary in that it identifies complex cerebral experiences that language often struggles to encapsulate: the existential response to the collapsing of past, present, and future, as well as the collision of self and Other (though in an imperial context).

Chapter 3, "History," ventures into the imaginative aspects of looking at pagan statuary as revealed in chronicle descriptions. Arguing that the "newness" of icons on the Byzantine cultural landscape severed them from the empire's long-term continuity, Chatterjee foregrounds the historical endurance of pagan statues. Their origins, planted within the past, granted them an unmatched historical gravity; in turn, their forms exuded a charismatic--even vitalizing--appeal, willing that a beholder know how to view them. To substantiate this mystique, the author turns to the ekphrastic descriptions of Niketas Choniates' *De Signis*. Such passages, she contends, enlivened pagan statues with elaborate narratives that negated their status as inanimate objects, "saturating them with life or life-likeness" (123). In particular, Chatterjee draws attention to a description of a statue that was believed to ward away serpents. Here, Choniates reads a seemingly static form as a series of events: a violent jolt begins a battle between eagle and snake; the two struggle and rise from the earth to the heavens, writhing toward the serpent's eventual demise. Such accounts gave rise to the affective (and phenomenologically compelling) narratives that advanced viewers (or readers) through energetic, storied actions. Conversely, chronicles and anecdotes underscored Christian material culture's inertness: it did nothing to exact preventive or protective forms of agency, and even the True Cross failed to prevent the murder of the boy prince Tiberius.

Chatterjee's unraveling of Choniates' written work is deserving of particular praise: it is a beautiful and sensitive examination of the inter-medial and cross-disciplinary significance of visual interpretation skills. Necessarily the sharpest tool of the art historian, visual analysis begins by reckoning with the viewer's tendency to interpret fixed scenes as compressions of the numerous events contained within their narratives. Deducing which other moments are evoked and inflected as the eye navigates a form is a cogitative exercise, and the author's discussion of this matter as an important facet of Byzantine literature is a much-appreciated correspondence between textual analysis and Chatterjee's home field.

Chapter 4, "Mimesis," explores the valence of pagan statues in twelfth-century Hellenistic novels through the works of Theodore Prodromos, Eumantios Makrembolites, and Niketas Eugenianos. These resources, according to the author, are useful for extracting the reactive--even recursive--dynamics of encountering pagan statues, which serve as catalysts that advance the novels' plots forward. Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, for example, likens Rhodanthe to pagan material

[Skip to content](#)

forms by staging her beauty as the craftsmanship of pagan gods (who fashioned her in their own likenesses); similarly, Eugenianos' *Drusilla and Charikles* presents gravitational interrelations between otherwise distinctive realms like "words, images, humans, gods, and nature" as natural law (130). The numerous interpretive possibilities that such a principle--which both finds similitudes across and convolutes categories--creates the potential for characters and objects to assume multiple identities. Chatterjee posits that this conflation of otherwise divisible types "may be applied fruitfully to a corpus of Byzantine objects" (130). She is especially interested in adapting this approach to images within the non-religious domain, which, according to her assessments, "explicitly indulged their potential for multiple readings" (130).

Following, Chatterjee addresses the ivory Veroli casket, the imagery of which offers numerous, and slight, permutations of the various figures and motifs represented across its surfaces. Emphasizing the Dionysiac scene and images of Bacchus, she indicates that its highly elaborate carvings do not demand a linear reading, as one might see in a typical left-to-right, top-to-bottom program. Rather, the object's pictorial syntax entertains a more cyclical reading that pushes the viewer back and forth across its surface, much as the inter-relational reasoning of natural law found in novels pushes one back and forth across identifying categories. This sort of ambiguity is proposed to be "essentially an ontological ambiguity" that interfaces with authenticity and copying, much as humans and gods, or humans and statues, are described in Hellenistic texts (141). The base point elucidated by Chatterjee is that imagery with oppositional or recursive compositions was intended to have flexible, even polysemic readings, much like the statues and mimetic entities within the novels that she has explored. Approaching imagery like that on the Veroli casket--scenes that appear visually incomprehensible--with an openness to its potential for housing multiple meanings is helpful for making sense of its incoherence. This topic is richly explored by art historians researching communities whose traditions were preserved through oral histories and images, and it is exciting to see it so productively applied to an empire that was profusely invested in text-based literacy. The reader is left pleasantly curious: foremost about how Chatterjee arrived at this assertion, as well as to how these interpretive methods may potentially be adopted more readily in future scholarship.

In Chapter 5, "Epigrams and Statues," Chatterjee extrapolates how sculpture related to matter, maker, and viewer within Byzantine literary traditions (and therefore within the minds of the readers of their words) by tying them to contemporaneous image theories. The issues at hand during and after the Iconoclasm are significant to this discussion, as they reveal a sharp dependency on image-oriented practices that were ultimately used to disempower them. The author argues that iconoclastic writings "borrow" from ekphrastic conventions to reject "the very possibilities required by a successful ekphrasis in order to play its image-text games productively" (186). It is a thoughtful chapter that guides the previous arguments toward a resolution: in connecting objects between "widely disparate realms and experiences" (202), it offers a dignified descent through the imaginative shifts that impacted images and literature as the definitions of acceptable and unacceptable imagery expanded and contracted.

The book ends with a potent epilogue ("Manuel Chrysoloras and The Sense of the Past"), in which Chatterjee walks the reader through the prognostics of the late empire's nostalgia for its ancient history. Theologians and philosophers, continually invested in the concept of the "copy" explored in the previous chapters, framed Rome as a cultural and imperial "prototype" from which Constantinople--as well as the "true" faith of Christianity--emerged. Pagan statues therefore reminded Christian Byzantines of their cultural heritage, of their assumed-to-be improved emergence from the prototype, and that Constantinople was an improved copy of Rome. Pointing to the writings of Manuel Chrysoloras, a fifteenth-century scholar, the author elucidates that "images grant precision to history in a way that mere words cannot" (208). Chrysoloras's descriptions of pagan statues, tombs, and columns are the cardinal means of orienting the reader through the physical city; and, presciently, those observing ruins offer foreknowledge of its impending fall. These writings are salient to our considerations of how Byzantines thought about the lifespan of their empire: decline was normalized and presented as a near-condition of statehood. Yet, the endurance of pagan statues presented viewers with signals toward its potential revival. Poetically, Chatterjee uses this chapter to attend to the present as a temporal state that is always invigorated by, even overlaps with, the past.

The generative and agentic roles that the antique played within the Byzantine mind are not unfamiliar to Chatterjee: among other publications, she has produced thought-provoking articles on what it meant to look at ruins of the ancient past (2017), as well as the conferral of meanings between pagan motifs and the Christian empire's ideological principles (2014/2015). However, the argument of this monograph--which traces the incredibly nuanced interrelations between

[Skip to content](#)

pagan images, intellectual culture, and the ontological habits of Byzantium in long form--is ambitious and well-managed. There is but one deficit: Chatterjee's outstanding capacity to interrogate the phenomenological effects of objects--to beautifully describe them with the exact, fleeting speed at which they are apprehended by viewers (in a capacity that rivals Choniates)--has limited extension. This is by no fault of the author but is instead a result of circumstance, as, again, the objects at the heart of the study no longer exist and a genuine analysis would be impossible. And readers will not suffer: Chatterjee's examples are thorough, venturing far across the expanses of Byzantine literature to expressly draw much-needed attention to the positionalities of the pagan statuary that once occupied Constantinople. Effectively widening the scholarly space devoted to recovering the trans-temporal significations of pre-Christian images within medieval minds, *Between the Pagan Past and Christian Present in Byzantine Visual Culture* is fresh, meticulous, and accomplished.

