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## Faith and Reason in Antiquity: A Photo Essay

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### Introduction

On the third day of the LMU President's Institute, fellows took a field trip to the Getty Villa located on the coast in Pacific Palisades, California. The Villa introduces art from the Etruscan, Greek, and Roman cultures extending from the Bronze Age through the Late Roman Empire—approximately 3,000 BCE to 600 CE.

During their visit, the curator of the special exhibit "Mosaics Across the Roman Empire" provided a private tour for the fellows, explaining the history and function of mosaics, as well as how pre-Christian themes from Greek and Roman mythology emerged into Christian themes over

time. Fellows considered how faith and reason were exemplified in the mosaics. We invited the fellows to photograph scenes and objects that resonated with them around the themes of faith and reason. On the following day, fellows presented their photographs, along with a narrative of their personal connection between it and the theme. Presented in this essay are some of the fellows' photographs and reflections. It includes contributions from Véronique Flambard-Weisbart, Maire B. Ford, Steve Mailloux, Cathleen McGrath, James M. Plečnik, Elizabeth C. Reilly, and Sue Scheibler.



*LMU President's Institute Fellows, Greek Theatre, The Getty Villa*

McGrath & Reilly,  
*LMU President's  
Institute  
Collection:  
Introduction and  
Overview*

Snyder, *Necessary  
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McGrath & Reilly,  
*President's  
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About the  
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*Faith and Reason  
in Antiquity:  
A Photo Essay*

***Medusa: Her Hair, My Hair?***

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***Mosaic Floor with Head of Medusa***  
*Roman, from Rome, Italy, about 115-150 A.D.*  
*Stone tesserae*  
*106 1/2 × 106 1/2 in.*  
*The Getty Villa, Auditorium, Lobby*

The mosaic of Medusa at the Getty Villa first inspired me because of the sense of self-recognition I experienced with this icon. Medusa's hair is much like mine; you would not be hard-pressed to see the resemblance. I joked about this anecdote with my peers at the LMU President's Institute in summer 2016. However, beyond the self-recognition the myth of Medusa also speaks to me of her life as a terrifying woman who, having been raped in Athena's temple by Poseidon, was punished by the goddess with a mane of venomous snakes instead of hair and a gaze that could petrify the onlooker. By putting her story into words, the myth of Medusa not only defines her close relationship with the gods but also confers meaning and unity to the irrational. As I am now analyzing her myth and trying to make sense of it using reason as a tool, I am simultaneously interpreting it with my senses and demonstrating faith in the recognition of the irrational and the supernatural. To me, Medusa signifies the entanglement of faith and reason in a single subject/object.

***Interweaving Faith and Reason***

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***Diana and Callisto Surrounded by a Hunt***  
*Gallo-Roman, from Villelaure, France, A.D. 175–200*  
*Stone and glass; 116 3/4 × 107 in.*  
*Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art,*  
*from the Phil Berg Collection, M.71.73.9*  
*VL.2016.1*

This mosaic representing interlaced ropes was striking to me. I do not have training in art history, nor do I have training in Etruscan, Greek, or Roman culture. However, my untrained eye quickly fastened upon this piece. I found the patterns interesting and somehow satisfying. There was a certain sense of comfort and completeness in the interwoven pattern. I do not think I would have felt the same way about this piece had it depicted the ropes separately. With regard to the theme of our institute this piece felt representative of the interwoven nature of faith and reason. Separately, the ropes are not as satisfying, complex, or beautiful as when interwoven together. We often try to treat faith and reason as separate entities to be used for different purposes, and in many circumstances



this might be appropriate. Yet, when we find a circumstance where faith and reason can be used together as two separate, but interwoven perspectives we can create a much more complete and intriguing picture.

***Tip Toes Upon Stones***

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*The Getty Villa*

Carefully balancing on tip-toes upon a stack of black-and-white stones? Having faith that he will not fall? Reasoning that it is worth the risk?

No, simply standing on a marble floor at the Getty while thinking about the relation of faith and reason, belief and understanding.

Many different ways to think about those relationships, many perspectives from which to view them.

But each begins with a grounding somewhere. Standing firmly on the floor of one's current understanding of what one believes or feet balanced precariously on the foundation of religious faith in the contemporary post-secular age. Reasoning oneself toward faith or believing so that you can understand.

***Beauty from Dissonance***

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***Griffin***

*Roman, from Syria, A.D. 400–600*  
*Stone; 63 × 68 1/4 in.*  
*The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California*  
*71.AH.113*

This image of a griffin, depicted in a Syrian mosaic dating from the time between 400-600 CE, provides an excellent visual representation of the exploration of the relationship between faith and reason during this President's Institute.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the week we have explored two concepts that at first seem quite separate: faith and reason. We have explored where they come together to form a new entity that moves us closer to what is good and true. Just as the mosaics that have traveled across time and continents, we began with an exploration of the meaning of faith and reason from theological and philosophical perspectives and carried that understanding through each of our disciplines and perspectives.

This creature, with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion, lumbering through the mosaic that was torn from a floor, mostly likely not far from Antioch, but the exact origins are unknown.<sup>2</sup> Its beauty emerges from dissonance; as I gaze upon it, I wonder why this lion has the head of an eagle and wings. Surprise calls forth attention, and that attention invites me to consider how this creature might bring together the best of the lion and the best of the eagle and in fact become something even more than its unlikely combination. As the

image shows, beauty emerges from the bits of tesserae joined together sometimes, although not always, smoothly. The rough edges of the mosaic remind me that this is a well-traveled griffin. It has taken a long journey from a floor in Syria to a museum overlooking the Pacific Ocean. One image has moved through so many different contexts. So many people have used this mosaic, walked upon it, impressed others with it, and reflected upon its meaning.

***Reflection on Syrian Church Mosaics from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries***

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***Bull***  
*Roman, from Syria, possibly Emesa (present-day Homs), A.D. 400–600*  
*Stone; 49 3/8 x 70 1/2 in.*  
*The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California, Gift of William Wabler*  
*75.AH.117*

On our trip to the Getty Villa I was drawn to the various mosaics on display. While there were many mosaics of extraordinary detail and size that depicted entire towns and rich stories, my focus was on a number of the simpler pieces. Specifically, I was drawn to the Syrian church mosaics that depicted animals and nature. Though I have visited many churches over the years, I have never seen symbols of nature featured so prominently in modern churches. In fact, when I first saw the mosaics, I was genuinely surprised to learn that they had adorned churches.

Retrospectively, I should not have been surprised that ancient churches utilized images from nature.

At the time these mosaics were created (roughly 1500 years ago), it was commonly understood that humans felt God's blessings through nature, and that we could better understand God by better understanding nature. In the philosophical language of the day (e.g., Augustine of Hippo), it was understood that humans could better know the Creator through the created. Rather than considering faith and reason as two opposing forces, philosophers and scientists enjoyed the study of nature as a means of learning of (and increasing their faith in) God.

However, as science explained the causes of many natural phenomena that people once considered direct blessings from God (e.g., rain), faith and reason became somewhat estranged. This, of course, need not be the case. Understanding that rain is not caused by a ritual or prayer aimed at the sky does not remove the blessing of rain. We should, in fact, be more in awe of creation and the Creator as we learn about the complexity and resilience of the natural systems and creatures that surround us.

As professors at a Catholic university we must realize that even when classes have no direct mention of theology we are teaching about creation. Therefore, we are indirectly teaching about the Creator. I believe that these mosaics served as (and continue to serve as) a reminder that faith, reason, belief, and nature need not exist in different spheres.

*Two institute fellows elected to write about peacocks. Note the different approaches to the same mosaic.*

***Incorruptible and Immortal***

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***Orpheus and the Animals***

*Gallo-Roman, from Saint-Romain-en-Gal, France  
A.D. 150–200  
Stone and glass; 73 1/4 x 74 7/16 in.  
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu,  
California  
62.AH.2.13*

Animals made recurring appearances in the mosaics of the early Syrian church (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). Typical of many images found in churches across antiquity, I note bridges between polytheism and monotheism. One particularly striking example is the peacock. Found in Roman sanctuaries as one of the guardians of those dedicated to Juno, the goddess who served as the protector of women and of Rome, live peacocks would roam freely. As the worship of the gods gave way to the worship of the one Christian God, the peacock similarly transitioned. St. Augustine in his work *The City of God* described how the flesh of the peacock would not rot, even after he consumed it many days after preparation.<sup>3</sup> Augustine used the peacock as but one example found in nature to argue for immortality.<sup>4</sup> From the earliest times, Christian philosophers and theologians did not view faith and reason as

contradictory and instead celebrated the beauty and wonder found in creation as instantiation of many of its teachings and as signs of God in all things.

***Meditation on a Peacock***

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***Peacock Facing Left***

*Roman, from Syria, possibly Emesa (present-day Homs), A.D. 400–600  
Stone; 77 1/2 x 45 1/2 in.  
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu,  
California, Gift of William Wabler  
75.AH.121*

When I see the image of the peacock, I think first of its place in Buddhism where it is a figure of promise. In Buddhist mythology, the peacock eats poison and, in so doing, turns its drab, brown feathers into the beautiful, multicolored ones for which it is known. In a similar manner, through following the Buddhist eight-fold path, people are able to transform the three poisons—greed, aversion, and delusion—into wisdom and compassion. But I am also reminded of its significance in early Christian thought where the peacock symbolized eternal life. While Buddhists saw the peacock eating poison, early Christians saw the peacock drinking the water of eternal life and, through this act, entering into a relationship with the transcendent God. Meditating on the



mosaic of the peacock, informed by both Buddhist and Christian world views, I am struck by the importance of both wisdom and

compassion; the wise heart and compassionate mind that are crucial for addressing the world's suffering. HJE



*The Getty Villa*

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Alexis Belis, *Roman Mosaics in the J. Paul Getty Museum*. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016), <http://www.getty.edu/publications/romanmosaics>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 568.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 569.