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Hellenism and the Shaping of the Byzantine Empire

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Hellenism and the Shaping of the Byzantine Empire

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Since the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, perhaps no aspect of its tremendous legacy has more completely defined it in the popular and historical consciousness than its integral role in the preservation and dissemination of the art, literature, and philosophy of ancient Greece. Indeed, because the emphasis on and association with Hellenic culture that constituted a fundamental aspect of Byzantium facilitated the transmission of the cultural legacy of Ancient Greece to both the Muslim world and, ultimately, Western Europe, the Empire has, as Anthony Kaldellis asserts in *Hellenism in Byzantium*, consistently been cast, both popularly and historiographically, as the mere "caretaker of the classical tradition for the ultimate benefit of the West, its 'true' heir."[1] The integral role of Hellenism in the Byzantine Empire has been thoroughly examined vis-à-vis its external influence – its effects on the Islamic and Western worlds, to which the Hellenic culture that the Empire preserved as an essential element of its identity was transmitted. Meanwhile, its internal importance – its causes and its cultural and political effects within the Empire – has been generally neglected. Thus, through a reevaluation of Byzantine Hellenism that takes into account its geographical, linguistic, and cultural origins, as well as its influence on education, literature, art, religion, and society in the Empire, it is possible to gain a fuller, more complete understanding of the way in which it shaped not only the broader history of Western civilization but also the Byzantine Empire itself.

While the role of Byzantine Hellenism on the art, literature, and society of the Empire has been the subject of tremendous study, the question of its origins has, nonetheless, rarely been raised, and the strongly Hellenic Byzantine identity seems, to a large extent, to have been taken for granted historiographically. Given the foundation of the Empire on Roman and Christian

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[1] Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: the Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11. In this paper, I will make reference to both "Hellenic" and "Hellenistic" traditions: the former refers to Greece itself, and, for the purposes of this paper, the culture of classical Greece specifically, while the latter refers to those regions in the eastern Mediterranean assimilated into Hellenism by Greek expansion.

identities that stood, in many ways, in direct opposition to Hellenism, however, such an attitude towards Byzantine Hellenism is untenable: since the inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire viewed themselves as essentially Roman – an identity that Steven Runciman asserts was inherently mistrustful of the "Greek character" – and essentially Christian – the beliefs of Orthodox Christianity and the pagan attitudes of Hellenism were, as Kaldellis maintains, fundamentally incompatible world-views – the ultimate fact of the Byzantine cultural association with classical Greece was hardly inevitable.[2] Indeed, it would seem that the Byzantine Empire was uniquely indisposed to embrace any semblance of classical Greek influence or Hellenic identity. Thus, the question of the causes of the emergence of Hellenism as a pillar of Byzantine culture and, eventually, even something of a national identity is a tremendously important one, and an examination of the geographical, linguistic, and cultural origins of Byzantine Hellenism will illuminate not only its nature but also its place in Byzantine society, as well as the way in which it was able to play so prominent a role in the shaping of the Empire itself.

In the third decade of the fourth century, when Constantine the Great was searching for a place where he could found a city as a monument to his military successes, he was particularly impressed with the location of the Greek city of Byzantium: with its location on the eastern tip of a promontory and separated from Asia only by the narrow straits of the Bosphorus, it was surrounded by water on three sides, both "a magnificent harbor and an impregnable stronghold," as John Julius Norwich describes in *A Short History of Byzantium*.[3] Constantine, therefore, chose Byzantium as the location of his new capital of Constantinople, and, in so doing, he laid the foundations for the future Byzantine Empire. The geographic location of the city and the empire centered around it, however, would not merely play a militarily and economically strategic role

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[2] Steven Runciman, "Gibbon and Byzantium," *Daedalus* 105 (1976): 106; Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 2-3.
[3] John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 1.

in the history of Byzantium; rather, it would also be a primary source of the development of Byzantine Hellenic identity. Both the city of Constantinople itself and much of the Eastern Empire at the time of Constantine were fundamentally Greek: the city of Byzantium had been Greek since it was founded by colonists from Megara in the seventh century B.C.E.; as Geoffrey Horrocks asserts in *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers*, in accordance with Herodotus' *Histories*, much of Asia Minor, mainland Greece, and the Balkans had been "Hellenized" by the first waves of invading Greek-speakers in the seventeenth century B.C.E, and had therefore been primarily Greek for almost two millennia by the fourth century C.E; and the conquests of Alexander in the fourth century B.C.E. and the subsequently established Hellenistic kingdoms had Hellenized much of the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, Syria, and Palestine.[4] Indeed, as A. H. M. Jones asserts in "The Hellenistic Age," the peoples of such regions became, through intermarriage with Greeks, the adoption of Greek political systems, and the spread of the Greek language, Hellenes whose culture was "singularly pure and but little contaminated."[5] The Byzantine Empire, therefore, was, at its inception, born into a world that was truly Greek.

Of course, one of the primary implications of the geographical ties of Byzantium to the Hellenic world is the association of the Empire and its inhabitants with the Greek language. Prior to its division into Eastern and Western halves, the Roman Empire had, as Horrocks states, already been decidedly divided linguistically: if one imagines "a line running above Thrace, Macedonia, and Epirus, and down across the Mediterranean to divide North Africa at the Western End of Cyrnaica," he says, Latin dominated north and west of the line, while Greek was

[4] Horrocks, Geoffrey C.. *Greek: a history of the language and its speakers* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 207-210; Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.56-57; Demetrios J. Constantelos, Constantelos, Demetrios J., *Christian Hellenism: essays and studies in continuity and change* (New Rochelle, N.Y. : A.D. Caratzas, 1998), 3-5.

[5] Jones, A. H. M, "The Hellenistic Age," *Past & Present* 27 (1964): 22

the most prominent language south and east of it.[6] These linguistic differences were not fully entrenched, however, until the increasing separation of the two halves of the Roman Empire in the fifth century C.E. and after. As Horrocks maintains, mobility between the Eastern and Western Empires prior to the split had in the past assured that neither Greek nor Latin was completely dominant in either's respective region of prominence – such administrative records as the *Notitia Dignitiatum* from the early fifth century show that there were even designated officials to facilitate inter-linguistic correspondence, reflecting the important role of both Latin and Greek.[7] As the Western Empire declined and the Eastern Empire developed as an independent entity, however, such interaction decreased, creating a linguistic divide of Latin in the West and Greek in the East that would come to play a major role in Byzantine-Western European relations for centuries.[8] Nonetheless, after the division of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century, Latin continued, for a long time, to play an important role in the Byzantine state – which was comprised generally of governmental apparatuses that were inherited from the unified Roman Empire of the past – but Greek existed as the language dominant for most of the Empire's inhabitants on every level of Byzantine society, and, in the early seventh century C.E., the emperor Herakleios adopted the Greek title *basileus*, marking both the adoption of Greek as the official language and, as Horrocks notes, "the final abandonment of Latin."[9]

Such linguistic divisions were accompanied and even preceded by cultural divisions that had developed in the period from the late first to the early third century C.E. known as the

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[6] Horrocks, *Greek*, 207.
[7] "Notitia Dignitatum," Fordham Medieval Sourcebook, accessed on November 23, 2010, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/notitiadignitatum.html.
[8] Horrocks, *Greek*, 208.
[9] Horrocks, *Greek*, 210-212. The continuing influence of Latin even after the fall of the Western Empire is evidenced by such emperors as Justinian, whose *Corpus Iuris Civilis* reflects a continuing reliance on and affinity for Latin (as well as for its inherent "Roman-ness"). The Byzantine "dark age" of the seventh and eighth centuries, however, reinforced the prominence of Greek over Latin in both the workings of the state and the lives of the people.

"second sophistic," which represented a revival of Greek rhetoric, philosophy, and literature. As such Greek writers as Aristeides, Dion, Philostratos, and Lucian reinvigorated classical Hellenic culture, they created within the Empire a society that held, as Kaldellis asserts, "classical Greece…[as] a normative standard," a society in which art, literature, and philosophy were all of fundamentally Greek character.[10] With such renewed emphasis on Hellenic culture, the intellectual and artistic center of the Empire naturally shifted from Rome to the Hellenistic world, and, as Norwich asserts, such cities as Alexandria, Antioch, and Pergamum became cultural capitals while Rome itself was transformed into a "backwater."[11] This shift was ultimately one of the central causes of Constantine's establishment of a new capital for the Roman Empire, but it also served to revive the Hellenic cultural legacy with which the Byzantines would ultimately identify their empire. Because of both the reinvigoration of Hellenic literature, philosophy, and art, and the subsequent geographic shift of the Roman Empire's cultural centers from West to East, the Byzantine Empire, upon its inception, essentially inherited not only the cultural legacy but also the cultural primacy of the Hellenism of the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the second sophistic reinforced the duality of Western "Romanism" and Eastern Hellenism. Indeed, as Kaldellis points out, "Hellenism…thrived on the old distinction between Greeks and barbarians," and the second sophistic, to a great extent, cast the East as "Greek" and the West as "barbarian."[12] The Byzantines, therefore, also inherited what Horrocks characterizes as a sort of Hellenic attitude of superiority, an attitude that would later play a tremendous role in shaping Byzantine culture and society.[13]

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[10] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 36.
[11] Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, 12.
[12] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 39.
[13] Horrocks, *Greek*, 208.

Thus, the Byzantine Empire was, as Demetrios Constantelos asserts in *Christian Hellenism*, "raised on the foundations of this Hellenic and Hellenized world" in spite of the Roman and Orthodox Christian identities that would seem to be diametrically opposed to Hellenism.[14] It is true that the Byzantines were, in their minds, Romans – or *Romaioi*, as they called themselves – and they remained so until the fall of their empire in 1453. The Byzantines' Roman identity, however, was primarily confined to their conceptions of their state and their place in it – as Kaldellis asserts, it was akin to a modern national identity, i.e. they saw themselves as belonging "to a single historical political community" united by laws and institutions.[15] Nonetheless, the Empire was, as Constantelos maintains, always "conscious of its direct continuity with the classical and Hellenistic Greek world," and, thus, it seems that Byzantine Hellenism was ultimately more fundamental than Byzantine Romanism, and formed the underpinning of the language and culture of the Empire from its very inception.[16]

The importance of Orthodox Christianity as a fundamental constituent of the Byzantine identity, however, would seem to have presented a more serious impediment to the development of Byzantine Hellenism. Indeed, how could the seemingly fundamentally divergent worldviews of ancient Greek paganism and Byzantine Orthodox Christianity be reconciled? Any such reconciliation would have been seen in the fourth or fifth century C.E. to be difficult, if not impossible, for, at that time, the dominant belief amongst Christians was, as Kaldellis asserts, epitomized by the Roman Emperor Julian's characterization in his *Contra Galileos* of Hellenism as not complementary to Christian beliefs, but rather fundamentally opposed to them.[17] The Byzantines, however, chose not to abandon their Hellenism in favor of Christianity; as

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[14] Constantelos, *Christian Hellenism*, 5.
[15] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 43.
[16] Constantelos, *Christian Hellenism*, 5-6.
[17] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 143; Julian, *Against the Galileans*, Translated by Wilmer Cave Wright, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/julian_apostate_galileans_1_tet.htm.

Constantelos asserts, they chose not to eschew "the old inheritance" in favor of "the new faith."[18] Instead, they created a culture that actively sought the reconciliation of Hellenism and Orthodox Christianity. For example, in his "Advice to Young Men on Studying Greek Literature," St. Basil encourages students to embrace the classical literature that constitutes such an important part of their cultural legacy, but he also commands them to turn away from anything therein that may contradict their Christian faith.[19] Likewise, in *In calumniatorem Platonis*, Bessarion attempts to prove the compatibility of such classical philosophers as Plato and Aristotle with Christianity.[20] And, in his "Epigram on Plato and Plutarch," John Mauropous asserts that Plato and Plutarch "both were very close to [Christ's] laws in both teaching and way of life."[21] There was, as Kaldellis asserts, always a conflict between "inner" religious culture and "outer" secular Hellenic culture, but the Byzantines could never eschew the latter in favor of the former – they could never abandon their Greek foundations.[22]

This approach to Byzantine identity – which asserts that the Byzantines were *essentially* Greek, but maintained a political and national façade of Romanism – is one that Kaldellis disputes. He asserts that "the Byzantines were Romans who happened to speak Greek and not Greeks who happened to call themselves Roman."[23] With such a characterization, however, Kaldellis neglects both the immutably Greek foundations of the Byzantine Empire in the Hellenic and Hellenistic world, and the geographic and cultural importance of the fundamental shift of social and cultural norms engendered by the second sophistic. More saliently, he neglects

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[18] Constantelos, *Christian Hellenism*, 11.
[19] St. Basil. "St. Basil on the Study of Classical Greek Literature," in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 393-395.
[20] Bessarion, "Aristotle and Plato Compared," in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 399-400.
[21] John Mauropous, "May Christ Save Plato and Plutarch," in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 395.
[22] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 181.
[23] Ibid., 113.

the underlying continuity with ancient Hellenism that Byzantine culture and society represented until the fall of the Empire. As will be discussed below, Kaldellis is correct in his characterization of the transformation of Byzantine Hellenism into something of a national identity in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, but by alienating the fundamentally Hellenic quality of the Byzantine identity from most of the Empire's cultural and social history, he fails to recognize both Byzantium's educational, literary, artistic, and philosophical continuity with ancient Greece, and the tremendous influence of Hellenism on the thought and practice of Orthodox Christianity. Indeed, as has been shown, the geographical, linguistic, and cultural circumstances into which the Eastern Roman Empire was born created a truly Greek identity for Byzantium that would permeate its culture and ultimately come to define it in opposition to the Latin West. Thus, it is only through an examination of Byzantine Hellenism that takes into account these cultural and religious continuities as well as later political and social developments that it is possible to gain a more complete understanding of its internal importance for the Empire.

Perhaps nothing is more responsible for the aforementioned spread of Hellenic identity throughout the eastern Mediterranean than the role of the *paideia* – the educational regime that served, as Moses Hadas asserts in "Hellenistic Literature," as an "initiation into the cultural traditions of Greece" – as the fundamental component of that identity.[24] Indeed, it was education in the *paideia*, not any ethnic affiliation, that truly constituted a Greek and thus allowed diverse groups of people, in spite of their non-Greek ethnic origins, to become Greeks in a very real way; it was by a shared cultural foundation of "Homer, rhetoric, and philosophy," not by blood, that the peoples of the Hellenic and Hellenistic worlds were united.[25] Given the cultural

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[24] Moses Hadas. "Hellenistic Literature." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 27.
[25] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 22.

establishment of the *paideia* in the Hellenistic world of the Eastern Roman Empire, and the revival during the second sophistic of the *paideia* by such sophists as Favorinus, the *padeia* was, from the inception of the Empire to its fall, the foundation of Byzantine Hellenism.[26] Thus, a student in the Empire was educated in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for, as an introduction to a Byzantine course on Homer asserts, Homer was seen as the foundation for all literature after him, and was therefore thought to be, along with such other classical authors as Euripides, the foundation of an education.[27] He was furthermore tutored in rhetoric, in order, as Michael Psellos writes in the *Chronographia*, "to become a fine speaker," using the classical rhetorical handbooks of Apollonius Dyscolus, Herodian, Hermogenes of Tarsus, and Aphthonius of Antioch.[28] Finally, he was schooled in Platonic, Aristotelian, and other Hellenic philosophy, which, as John Duffy notes in "The Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos," Psellos saw as the most essential component of true erudition, or *polymatheia*.[29] This *paideia* not only reinforced the fundamentally Hellenic quality of Byzantine culture – as will be shown below – but also produced within the Empire a level of general literacy unparalleled elsewhere in the western world. The description of Constantine-Cyril in the *Vita* of Constantine-Cyril – as one schooled in "Homer and geometry…and dialectic and all the teaching of philosophy, and in addition

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[26] Favorinus, "Corinthian Oration," in "Oration 37," of pseudo-Dion Chrysotomos, http://penelope. uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dio_Chrysostom/Discourses/37*.html; As Kaldellis (32) notes, Favorinus saw "personal engagement" with the *paideia* as a critical component of Hellenism.

[27] Eustathius of Thessalonika, "Introduction to a Course of Homer," in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 401; Alexander Turyn, *The Byzantine Manuscript Tradition of the Tragedies of Euripides* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957).

[28] Michael Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 173; Romilly J. H. Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 44.

[29] John Duffy, "The Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos," in *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 150; Psellos asserts in the *Chronographia* (173-174) that he revolutionized the study of philosophy, which he asserts had previously been barren. Nonetheless, he does not deny that the study of ancient philosophy has been a crucial part of the *paideia* long before his time.

rhetoric…and all the other Hellenic teachings" – encapsulates the role of the *paideia* in Byzantine culture.[30]

Given this emphasis on the Greek *paideia*, it seems inevitable that literary culture in the Empire would exhibit a strongly Hellenic influence, and, in spite of Karl Krumbacher's assertion in *The History of Byzantine Literature* that the works of Byzantine authors cannot be regarded as an extension of the classical world, the literature of Byzantium reflects tremendous continuity with the world of ancient Greece.[31] Indeed, as Herbert Hunger maintains in "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature," many of the literary models and techniques of the Byzantine world were derived almost entirely from classical models and techniques: from the satires of Ptochodromos that imitated Lucian, to the Homeric-influenced encomiast epics of George of Pisida, to Prokopios' *Wars of Justinian*, which, in certain passages, stylistically replicates Herodotus' *Histories*, to the hagiographies (biographies of saints) that were modeled on ancient aretologies (biographies of heroes or philosophers), literature in the Empire was – formally, at least – largely derivative.[32] There are even examples in Byzantine literature of "original" works actually having been copied with word-for-word accuracy from classical sources – Hunger cites two epigrams of the fifth century philosopher and writer Leo that were simply verses from Homer presented with slight grammatical changes.[33] Byzantine literature was also linguistically imitative of the works of ancient Greek authors. Indeed, as Horrocks notes, such authors as Michael Psellos and Anna Komnene wrote in a literary style of Greek largely

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[30] "Literacy in the Byzantine World, from the *Vita* of Constantine-Cyril and St. Stephen the Younger," in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 409.

[31] Herbert Hunger. "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23/24 (1969/1970): 15-38; Karl Krumbacher, *The History of Byzantine Literature: from Justinian to the End of the Eastern Roman Empire (527-1453)*, trans. David Jenkins and David Bachrach (Munich: Beck, 1897), 5-9.

[32] Hunger, "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature," 21; "Ptochodromos' Lament on a Poor Scholar, in Geanokoplos, *Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes* 414; Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature," 41, 52.

[33] Hunger, "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature," 33.

modeled after the Attic Greek of the fifth century B.C.E. and filled their works with "recherché vocabulary, elaborated word orders, rhetorical tropes and abundant literary quotations" that give "an impression of verbose and clichéd opacity."[34] Jenkins asserts that it was this style and, in particular, the emphasis on rhetoric that defined Byzantine literature more than anything else – he calls the influence of Hellenistic rhetoric on Byzantium "a straight-jacket" that confined such authors as George of Pisida to imitative displays of rhetorical skill.[35]

The influence of Hellenism on Byzantine literature was not confined to style and form, however. Indeed, classical themes and allusions feature prominently in works from throughout the history of the Empire. As Hunger asserts, the identification of the Byzantine Empire with the Hellenic tradition from its earliest date embedded in the cultural consciousness of Byzantines "a great number of mythological and historical situations and motifs" that are found throughout the literature of the Empire. Michael Psellos, for instance, used Achilles' noble lineage and glorious actions at Troy as a reference point for the heritage and successes of Constantine X Doukas in the *Chronographia*.[36] Anna Komnene made frequent references to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the general corpus of classical mythology, as well as to the history and art of ancient Greece in the *Alexiad*: she compared the force Alexios I Komnenos marshals to face Basilacius to a force that could challenge the *hekatonchires* – hundred-handed monsters – of Hesiod's *Theogony*; she referenced the Athenian sculptor Pheidias when she says that even his skill could not create such great beauty as that of her mother, Irene; and she quoted Homer's works, using such Homeric phrases as "numerous as the leaves and flowers of spring" to enhance her own narrative.[37] Even

[34] Horrocks, *Greek*, 214.
[35] Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature," 52, 42.
[36] Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 333.
[37] Hesiod, *Theogony,* trans. M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ll. 147-163; Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (New York: Penguin, 2009), 47, 107, 324; Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1998), II. 468.

religious works sometimes drew on Hellenic sources – Hunger notes a fifth century hymn by Synesius that compares Christ to Heracles.[38]

According to Krumbacher, works of philology constitute perhaps half of all the secular literature left by the Byzantine Empire. [39] These compilations of commentaries on ancient Greek literature and philosophy have, in many ways, played the greatest role in defining the aforementioned popular and historiographical conceptions of the Empire, for, Krumbacher states, "the basic importance of Byzantine philology rested on its maintenance and productive dissemination of antique wisdom," and thus it is through philology that the works of ancient Greece were ultimately transmitted to the Arabs and Western Europeans.[40] Indeed, as Krumbacher notes, philologists such as "Moschopoulos, Planudes…Eustathios, Psellos, Arethas and Photios," by preserving and editing the works of ancient authors, provided the foundation for the Italian Renaissance and the humanism it would propagate.[41] Moreover, such works as Photios' *Bibliotheca* – a collection of almost three-hundred summaries of various books – and the Suda Lexicon – an encyclopedia drawing on a vast array of classical sources – have preserved to the present day many works that would otherwise have been entirely lost.

While it is undeniable that Byzantine literature was largely founded upon Hellenic precedents and that the Hellenic tradition of the Byzantine Empire played a role of inestimable importance by preserving the literature of Greek antiquity, the characterization of literary culture in the Empire as worthy of disdain that Jenkins presents is, ultimately, truly unfair. When such historians as Jenkins deride Byzantine literature for its imitative qualities, they do so because they are examining the culture that produced it in a vacuum – they are passing aesthetic

[38] Hunger, "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature,"22.
[39] Krumbacher, *The History of Byzantine Literature*, 46.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

judgments on the Empire and neglecting the origins of Byzantine Hellenism, and, subsequently, Byzantine Hellenic continuity. Indeed, it is that continuity – which arose from the aforementioned geographic, linguistic, and cultural factors that defined the Empire's inception – that reveals the true nature of the seemingly derivative quality of Byzantine literature, for it reveals that the Byzantines saw their culture not as an imitation of that of the ancient Greeks but as a continuation of it. The Byzantines embraced ancient forms and techniques because they were their cultural inheritance. Thus, an examination of the literature of the Empire that takes these origins into account reveals the true role of Byzantine literary Hellenism in the way that qualitative aesthetic judgments do not.

Just as the *paideia*'s emphasis on Hellenic literature and rhetoric influenced Byzantine literature, so too did the *paideia*'s emphasis on Hellenic philosophy profoundly influence Byzantine philosophy. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, philosophy in the Empire was defined by "its relative continuity with ancient Greek literary culture," especially with regard to Aristotelian logic.[42] John of Damascus' *Dialectica*, for instance, was composed in the early eighth century and incorporated several notable commentaries on such Aristotelian works as the *Prior Analytics* and the *Posterior Analytics*. The aforementioned Photios, as well, wrote commentaries on Aristotle's works of logic, most notably on the *Categories*, in the ninth century. Perhaps no Byzantine philosopher played a more prominent role in the history of philosophy in the Empire than Michael Psellos, whose commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories*, *De interpretatione*, and *Prior Analytics*, as well as his own treatises, represented the pinnacle of Byzantine philosophical erudition. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the stature of Plato and such neo-Platonists as Plotinus grew within Byzantine philosophical discourse, as first

[42] "Byzantine Philosophy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on November 24, 2010, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/byzantine-philosophy/.

Theodore Metochites and Nikephoros Gregoras and later George Gemistos Plethon supported Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy over the mostly Aristotelian tradition of Byzantine philosophy.[43]

Given the prominence in Byzantine philosophy of commentaries on the works of ancient authors, it is not surprising that, in philosophy, as well, the Byzantine Empire has been regarded historiographically as primarily imitative and derivative. Indeed, the most prominent form in Byzantine philosophical writing was the paraphrase – in which an author would simply re-word and slightly re-work a Platonic dialogue or an Aristotelian treatise – which was practiced by philosophers from John Tzetzes to Theodore Metochites.[44] Moreover, the "straight-jacket" that Jenkins says rhetoric represented for Byzantium confined much of Byzantine philosophy to works of complex logic, which – in spite of the innovation that some such works represent, as Jonathan Barnes notes in "Syllogistic in the anon Heiberg" – are often characterized as un-original.[45] Thus, in philosophy, the Byzantine Empire is again frequently regarded as simply the caretaker of the Hellenic philosophical tradition for the West: Krumbacher asserts that Byzantine philosophy was valuable mostly insofar as it "stimulated and enriched the West," while Katerina Ierodiakonou seems to assert in *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources* that one of the most salient legacies of Byzantine philosophy lies in the fact that such philosophers as George Gemistos Plethon reengaged with the Platonic tradition and, therefore, stimulated "the revival of Platonic studies and Platonism in the Renaissance in the West."[46]

Of course, the influence of the Byzantine philosophical tradition on the West and the Italian Renaissance is undeniable – it is only through the preservation and transmission of the

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Jonathan Barnes, "Syllogistic in the anon Heidberg," in Ierodiakonou, *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, 97-137.
[46] Katerina Ierodiakonou, "Introduction," in Ierodiakonou, *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, 13.

works of the ancient Greek world by the Empire that those works were ultimately made available to the Western philosophers who would revive the classical tradition in Western Europe. Nonetheless, the characterization of Byzantine philosophy as fundamentally devoid of originality fails to recognize not only the way in which the geographic, linguistic, and cultural origins of Hellenism in the Empire fostered for Byzantines the sense that they were not imitating another culture but embracing their own, but also the contributions of such philosophers as Michael Psellos and George Gemistos Plethon to philosophy. Indeed, Psellos, Ierodiakonou suggests in "Psellos' Paraphrasis on *De Interpretatione,*" is subtle in his originality, but is original nonetheless: in his paraphrases on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione,* Ierodiakonou notes, Psellos seems to express his own view on the issue of universals, "not aiming to interpret the Aristotelian text" but rather using "a particular point in Aristotle's work as an opportunity to hint at his own views on the subject."[47] Plethon, moreover, represented, according to Polymnia Athanassiadi in "Psellos and Plethon on the Chaldaean Oracles," a man embracing a sort of mystical originality, blending neo-Platonism and "Oriental mysticism" and using the neo-Platonist *Chaldaean Oracles* – a Hellenistic work that originated in Chaldaea in the second century C.E. – not as a text to interpret or paraphrase but "as a companion of a new spiritual way."[48] Thus, in philosophy, Hellenism was, for the Byzantine Empire, not only a cultural heritage but also the foundation for intellectual originality.

It might seem unlikely that Byzantine art inherited any meaningful Hellenic influence: given the prominence of such religious art as *eikons*, or holy images, the possibility of any continuity between ancient Greek and Hellenistic art and the art of the Empire would seem

[47] Katerina Ierodiakonou, "Psellos' Paraphrasis on *De Interpretatione*," in Ierodiakonou, *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, 179.
[48] Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Psellos and Plethon on the Chaldaean Oracles," in Ierodiakonou, *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, 251.

remote. Indeed, as Kurt Weitzman asserts in "The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art and Their Impact on Christian Iconography," "Byzantine art, in all the phases of its long history, was dominated by religious subject matter."[49] Nonetheless, Byzantine art, like many other aspects of Byzantine culture, exhibited tremendous continuity with the classical and Hellenistic Greeks worlds, in its themes as well as in its form and technique. As Dmitri Ainalov asserts in *The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Art*, Byzantine art was, on its most fundamental level, "founded on the art of antiquity" – especially the art of Greek antiquity.[50] Thus, the tremendous artistic emphasis on the Hellenic – and even Minoan, pre-Hellenic – form of the wall painting in the early Byzantine Empire is indicative of what Ainalov calls "a broad Hellenistic current" in Byzantine art, as is the prominence of the mosaic – an artistic form that flourished in the Hellenistic world, using colored pieces of glass, tile, metals, or other materials to construct a cohesive image – throughout the history of the Empire, which underscores the fact that, as Ernst Kitzinger says in "Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," "there were still operative in Byzantium impulses from that same life force that had shaped Hellenistic art many centuries earlier."[51] According to Constantelos, even the *eikons* – in spite of their painted, two-dimensional, abstract images, exhibit, through their representations of divine or holy figures imbued with a symbolic significance – represented a sort of basic formal artistic continuity with the statuary of the ancient Greek world.[52]

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[49] Kurt Weitzman, "The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art and Their Impact on Christian Iconography," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 14 (1960): 68.
[50] Dmitri Ainalov, *The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Art* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 3.
[51] Ainalov, *The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Art*, 185; Ernst Kitzinger, "Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 115. Note that Ainalov uses the term "Hellenistic" to refer to the Greek world as a whole, including classical and pre-classical Greece as well as the Hellenized eastern Mediterranean, while Kitzinger uses it only to refer to the Hellenistice period from the conquests of Alexander in the mid-fourth century B.C.E to the conquest of Greece by the Romans in the mid-second century B.C.E.
[52] Constantelos, *Christian Hellenism*, 43. The connection between ancient Hellenic and Hellenistic statuary and Byzantine *eikons* will be further discussed below.

Moreover, Byzantine art adopted many of the motifs and themes found in ancient Greek art. Indeed, Weitzman cites two Byzantine silver plates – one in the collection of the Hermitage in Leningrad that features Athena, Ajax, and Odysseus, and another in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks that depicts an Amazon and a Trojan warrior – to illustrate the prominence of mythological elements in early Byzantine art.[53] While such mythological themes were prominent in early Byzantine art, over time, Weitzman suggests, the scenes and motifs of mythology were used less frequently as artistic subjects and more frequently as models for the representation of biblical scenes. Thus, an eleventh century manuscript of the first eight books of the Hebrew Old Testament depicts Samson's fight with the lion from the fourteenth chapter of the book of Judges in the same way in which Heracles' fight with the Nemean lion was traditionally represented in Hellenic and Hellenistic art.[54] Kitzinger also notes the adoption of themes popular in Hellenistic art into a more Christian context: the motif of "the baby's first bath," for instance, which was prominent among the many depictions of "babyhood" from the Hellenistic period, became, over time, a vital part of the iconography of the Nativity in Byzantine art.[55]

Thus, the artistic tradition of the Greek world was, in the Byzantine Empire, not a mere subject to be copied; it was the foundation for an entirely new, Christian artistic tradition based on a fundamentally different, more spiritual focus. In many ways, the primary aesthetic of Hellenic and Hellenistic art was, as Kitzinger says, utterly divergent from that of Byzantine art: the former emphasizes realism, the latter abstraction; the former is based in sensory experience, the latter in spiritual experience.[56] Nonetheless, even in the epitome of the abstract severity of Byzantine art that *eikons* represent, the Hellenic influence is evident, as Romilly H. Jenkins notes

[53] Weitzman, "The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art and Their Impact on Christian Iconography," 51.
[54] Ibid., 58.
[55] Kitzinger, "Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," 100.
[56] Ibid, 115.

in "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Civilization": such art represents, he asserts, the "restraint and austerity which one associates with the classical…tradition."[57] Hence, even at its points of divergence with Hellenic and Hellenistic art, Byzantine art still maintains an underlying affiliation with the artistic legacy of its Greek heritage. Indeed, although the tradition that the Byzantine Empire inherited by virtue of the geographic, linguistic, and cultural circumstances of its inception would ultimately be tremendously altered by an Orthodox Christian aesthetic, it nonetheless represented a means of crafting a truly Byzantine artistic legacy, and, thus, always remained a foundation for the art of the Empire.

As has been shown above, Byzantine Hellenism played a tremendously influential role in religion in the Empire in terms of its cultural aspects: in literature and in art, ancient Greek techniques and themes not only accompanied but also complemented Orthodox Christianity. The role of Hellenism in the religion of the Empire was not confined to those spheres, however; rather, the Hellenic tradition of Byzantium served, in many ways, to shape the Orthodox Christian religion itself. Indeed, the most fundamental tenets of Christianity – from the nature of Christ as both God and man to the immortality of the soul – were examined throughout the history of the Empire through the lens of the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, which, as Gustave E. von Grunebaum asserts in "Parallelism, Convergence, and Influence in the Relations of Arab and Byzantine Philosophy, Literature, and Piety," allowed Byzantine philosophers to "pinpoint" and "resolve" the "intellectual difficulties" those tenets presented.[58] It was through Aristotle's *De Anima*, for instance, that Theodore Metochites examined the immortality of the soul in his *Semeioseis gnomikai*.[59] Moreover, based on the aforementioned

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[57] Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Civilization," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 404.
[58] Gusatve E. von Grunebaum, "Parallelism, Convergence, and Influence in the Relations of Arab and Byzantine Philosophy, Literature, and Piety," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964): 93.
[59] "Byzantine Philosophy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Byzantine desire to reconcile Hellenism and Christianity, such intellectuals as Bessarion and John Mauropous asserted that the giants of Greek philosophy, such as Plato, represented, as Bessarion puts it in *In calumniatorem Platonis*, “a certain prefiguration” of Orthodox Christianity.[60] As stated above, ancient Greek philosophy was, for the Byzantines, a cultural inheritance, and, therefore, it is through a framework of that philosophy that Christianity was developed and understood in the Empire.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the prominence in Byzantine Christianity of *eikons*, or holy images. Indeed, the Byzantine veneration of *eikons* was, in many ways, the most direct example of the continuity of religion in the Empire with not only ancient Greek philosophy but also ancient Greek religious practices. According to Aphrodite Alexandrakis and Nicholas Moutafakis in *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*, the role of *eikons* in the Orthodox church represented both a “deeply Greek-rooted [philosophical] tradition” drawing upon Platonic and neo-Platonic ideas concerning aesthetics and the nature of images – as John of Damascus wrote, encapsulating the neo-Platonic philosophy of Plotinus, an image is “a likeness, or a model, or a figure of something, showing in itself what it depicts” – and a means of religious experience similar to the statues of ancient Hellenic religion.[61] Thus, the *eikon* of the Virgin was, as Alexandrakis and Moutafakis assert, comparable, in many ways, to ancient statues of Athena: *Theotokos* was the social and military patron of Constantinople in the same way that Athena had been the patron of Athens; consequently, for the Byzantines, her *eikon* took on the same symbolic role as the statue of Athena in the Parthenon.[62]

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[60] Bessarion, “Aristotle and Plato Compared,” in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 399-400; John Mauropous, “May Christ Save Plato and Plutarch,” in Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, 395.
[61] Aphrodite Alexandrakis and Nicholas J. Moutafakis, *Neoplatonism and Western aesthetics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 78; 79; 82; 74; Constantelos, *Christian Hellenism*, 43.
[62] Ibid., 79.

The continuity of Byzantine religious practice with Hellenic religious practice, however, was not confined to the veneration of *eikons*, nor was it confined to the city of Constantinople. According to Constantelos, it was the peasant culture of the Empire that had the most in common with the religious practice of ancient Greece; in fact, he asserts that the religiosity of that peasant culture shared more with the peasant culture of the ancient Greek world than it did with the urban populations of Byzantium.[63] Indeed, the "salvation rituals and superstition, popular festivals, and demonology" of rural religiosity, he maintains, had far more in common with ancient Hellenic practices than they did with the Orthodox Christian rituals of Constantinople.[64] The prominence of cults of saints in the peasant culture, he asserts, further reflected ancient religious practices by imitating the sense of "the apotheosis of the human being" that defined Hellenic hero and heroine cults, and the practices of *panspermia* (the offering of fruits to the dead) and *trichokouria* (the cutting of hair from the head of the newly baptized) remained basically unchanged from their practice in ancient Greek religion throughout the history of the Byzantine Empire. [65]

Like many aspects of Byzantine culture and society, therefore, religion in the Empire was fundamentally based in the Hellenic tradition, in terms of both philosophical frameworks for theological inquiry and religious practice. However, the geographic, linguistic, and cultural factors that aligned Byzantium with that Hellenic philosophical and religious tradition played a further role in Byzantine Christianity: by grounding the Byzantine church in the Greek tradition, they served, over time, to establish the Hellenic quality of Byzantine Orthodoxy in opposition to the growing Latin Church of Rome. Indeed, they entrenched the linguistic, cultural, and

[63] Ibid., 48.
[64] Ibid., 35.
[65] Ibid., 40, 35. As Constantelos notes, in ancient Greek religion, young males would, upon reaching puberty, sacrifice to Apollo, and hair would be cut from their heads.

theological differences that continually bred conflict between these two churches, leading to the Photian schism of the ninth century and, ultimately, to the Schism of 1054, which permanently split the Eastern and Western churches. Thus, in religion, Hellenism did not just define the Byzantine Empire – it defined it in opposition to the West.

This conflict between Byzantium and the West, however, was not merely a religious one. As Western Europe experienced tremendous economic, cultural, and political growth throughout the medieval period, it came to be, as Kaldellis asserts, an ideological and political opponent for the Byzantine Empire: it shared the Christian and Roman heritage of the Empire, but it embodied a Latin religious and cultural tradition fundamentally divergent from Byzantine Hellenism.[66] Indeed, the Greek-Latin linguistic divide had already split the East and the West, and the second sophistic and its geographic, linguistic, and cultural effects had imbued the Eastern Roman Empire and, subsequently, the Byzantine Empire with the aforementioned sense of Greek superiority – the dichotomy of "Greeks and barbarians" that Kaldellis asserts is an essential component of Hellenic identity.[67] The growth of western power and influence – especially after the eighth century – marked, therefore, a tremendous challenge to the ancient Byzantine Empire: as the West grew, Kaldellis states, the central conflict was, for the Byzantines, no longer one of Christians and Muslims or Romans and barbarians – it should be remembered that the Byzantines saw themselves, in spite of their Greek cultural affiliations, as politically and nationally Roman – but one of Romans and Romans.[68]

Hence, the Byzantines began, in the wake of burgeoning Western power, to transform their Hellenic identity, which had previously been confined to cultural and social realms, into an overarching national identity. In the *Chronographia* of the eleventh century, Michael Psellos

[66] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 295.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

crafted a sort of Byzantine national and political identity founded upon an intellectual and literary association with Hellenism; in the twelfth-century *Alexiad*, Anna Komnene characterized the Byzantines as culturally 'Greek' in opposition to the Latins; and both define those outside of that identity – including the Latins of the West – as barbarians alienated from culture, sophistication, and the true faith.[69] Moreover, the West, too, Kaldellis asserts, reinforced the Byzantine Greek identity by assigning to the Empire the Roman stereotypes of Greeks from both the classical era and late antiquity – as "faithless, greedy…obsequious…[and] prone to heresy" – as Liuprand of Cremona did in his tenth-century *Embassy to Constantinople*.[70] Thus, at the end of the twelfth century, in spite of the lack of any broad, organized East-West military conflict, tremendous cultural, political, and religious tension between the Latin West and the newly self-designated nationally 'Greek' East had been extant for more than a century. Following the direct conflict between the Latins and the Byzantines that the sack of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 represented, however, the role of Hellenism as a national identity for the Byzantine Empire took on an even greater prominence. Indeed, in the decades after the conquest of the capital of the Byzantine Empire by soldiers of the Latin West, such leading intellectuals of the remnants of Byzantine society as Emperor Theodore II Laskaris of the Empire of Nicaea promoted, according to Kaldellis, a "broader, collective sense [of Hellenic identity]…not limited to mere language or *paideia*."[71] Through such works as his anti-Latin treatises, Laskaris developed what Kaldellis calls a "holistic Hellenism" that extended beyond the intellectual affiliation with ancient Greece that Psellos emphasized, combining cultural

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[69] Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, passim; Komnene, *Alexiad*, passim.
[70] Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 337.
[71] Ibid., 340.

continuity with a national association that included all Byzantines, not merely an educated, urban elite.[72]

In many ways, the Hellenism of the Byzantine Empire was always defined in opposition to the West. From the linguistic and geographic divisions of the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries, to the cultural legacy of the second sophistic, the origins of Byzantine Hellenism necessarily imbued it with a sense of intellectual, artistic, and even religious superiority to the West. There could, however, be no national Hellenic identity without something in opposition to which it could be defined; there could be, vis-à-vis Byzantine-Latin relations, no sense of "Greeks and barbarians" without some cohesive rival that could eschew all other religious and national distinctions. Thus, it was only within the context of the growth of Western power and influence – with its Christian religion and Roman heritage – after the eighth century that Hellenism truly became something of a national identity that defined the Greek East in contrast to the Latin West. Indeed, in spite of the dominant cultural influence of Hellenism on the Empire throughout its history, the Byzantines continued to maintain their Roman national and political identities until that identity was no longer sufficient to distinguish between Byzantium itself and the Latin West, and it was only then that the Byzantine Empire truly became, as Kaldellis asserts, a Greek nation.[73]

The role of Hellenism in Byzantium was, therefore, a tremendously rich and diverse one. Indeed, from its cultural influence on literature, on philosophy, and on art, to its social impact on education, on religion, and, eventually, on national identity, the fundamentally Greek heritage of the Empire was a defining factor throughout its more than one-thousand years of history: it shaped Byzantine literary culture; it constituted the underpinning of all Byzantine philosophical

[72] Ibid., 374.
[73] Ibid., 337.

innovation; it had a formative influence on Byzantine art; it transformed and developed the Empire's Orthodox Christianity; and it eventually came to be a source of identity for all Byzantines. Its existence was not dry or static – it was vibrant and dynamic, the basis of centuries of culture, religion, and politics. Nor was it, to the Byzantines, imitative or derivate – it was simply *theirs*, the legacy of their ultimately Greek intellectual and cultural heritage.

Byzantine Hellenism was important, therefore, not only insofar as it preserved much of the work of Greek authors that would otherwise have been lost and transmitted it to the Middle East and the West, but also insofar as it played a truly meaningful role in the shaping of the Empire itself. Indeed, its internal importance was certainly equal to its external importance, and, through an examination of that Hellenism that takes into account both its geographic, linguistic, and cultural origins, and its effects on the educational, literary, philosophical, artistic, religious, and political worlds of the Empire, it becomes clear that, while the Byzantines preserved and disseminated the works of Greek antiquity, they also adopted the legacy of ancient Greece for their own, developing it into a flourishing culture that persisted and changed over the course of more than a millennium. Byzantine Hellenism did play an unparalleled cultural role in the general history of Western Civilization, but it must not be forgotten that it played just as great a role in the history of the Empire itself.

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