

*The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens.*  
By ANTHONY KALDELLIS. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 252. Cloth, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-88228-6.

In this impressively ground-breaking and wide-ranging study Anthony Kaldellis (hereafter K.) presents and corrects the western cultural narrative about the Parthenon accepted since the Enlightenment, namely that Byzantium did not embrace this iconic monument in its intellectual, cultural and spiritual life.

In the Introduction K. cites both modern and late antique proponents of this prejudicial viewpoint—e.g., the patristic author Tertullian, who famously asked “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”, and Cyril Mango, emeritus Bywater and Sotheby Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek Language and Literature at Oxford University, who firmly declared “The Byzantines in general did not evince the slightest interest in what we understand by classical Greece.” [[1]] K. sees in such statements a shared “particular view of history, a view that deals in large abstractions. Here Athens and the classical all lie on one side of a great divide with Christianity and all that is medieval or Byzantine on the other. The two sides may not overlap for they represent incommensurate world-views. This is a picture familiar from many textbooks and specialist studies” (p. 3). In contrast, K. investigates how medieval Greeks interacted with the Parthenon in particular and with classical Athens in general, exploring the Parthenon’s place in Byzantine cultural life through what he terms “philological art history” (p. xii). Proceeding chronologically, K. assembles Byzantine texts, some previously un-translated, as well as evidence and interpretive tools drawn from archaeology, art history, psychology and modern critical theory.

Chapter 1, “Conversions of the Parthenon,” summarizes textual and archeological evidence for the status of the building through the late 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. References in Thucydides, Plutarch, Pausanias and Libanius indicate that they considered the Parthenon only one among many notable sites in Athens; K. focuses upon its conversion to Christian use as a process exceptional for its respectful attitude toward the classical past. He utilizes archaeological reports and the meticulous plans and reconstruction drawings of Manolis Korres to present a compelling picture of pagan destruction and Christian resurrection of the building; Korres’ work, mostly published in Modern Greek, is both visually and intellectually compelling. On the basis of carefully translated texts both obscure (e.g., the *Tübingen Theosophy*) and famous (e.g., Vergil’s *Fourth Eclogue*, as quoted by the 5<sup>th</sup>-century

bishop Theodosios of Ankyra), K. argues in support of a late 5<sup>th</sup>-century date for the conversion of what was still a recognizably pagan Parthenon into a church that became famous through Christendom.

Imaginative and robust interpretation of scanty evidence dominates Chapter 2 “From students to pilgrims in medieval Athens (AD 532–848).” That various 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>-century figures visited Athens and the Parthenon is suggested by shadowy sources that K. admits may conform to traditional *topoi* current in subsequent centuries—i.e., that learned scholars must have studied in Athens and that devout pilgrims must have visited the shrine of the Theotokos Atheniotissa. The 10<sup>th</sup>-century source that identifies Stephanos of Sougdaia, 8<sup>th</sup>-century bishop of the Crimea, as such a pilgrim prompts K. to observe hopefully that “we have no other case where a visit to the Parthenon was invented out of nothing” (p. 70). Does such negative evidence belong in the discussion at all?

Chapter 3, “Imperial recognition: Basileios II in Athens (AD 1018),” concerns an imperial visit that acknowledged the importance of the Christian Parthenon. A brief 11<sup>th</sup>-century reference provides the sole evidence for this event: “after reaching Athens and giving thanks for his victory to the Mother of God, adorning the temple with magnificent and expensive dedications, [Basil] returned to Constantinople.” [[2]] K. reconstructs this visit, placing it in the context of Basil’s illustrious career, the precedents for imperial pilgrimage and gifts to shrines, and the nature of an Emperor’s retinue. On the basis of his plausible if speculative reconstruction, K. concludes that the Parthenon rivaled Constantinople itself as sacred to the Theometor, the Mother of God (p. 91).

Chapter 4, “Pilgrims of the middle period (AD 900–1100),” assembles evidence for the Parthenon’s popularity among pilgrims even before Basil II lent it imperial prestige. K. deftly uses an episode from the *Life of Luke of Steiros* (d. 953) to illustrate a trend in pilgrimage by Greeks and Westerners already well-established in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century: Luke fled his home village with Roman monks traveling to Jerusalem, who detoured to Athens where “they entered the holy church of the Mother of God; and after praying, they left him in the monastery where they were staying.” Luke’s 10<sup>th</sup>-century biographer evidently considered such a pilgrimage not at all extraordinary, for he neither explains nor justifies it to his Byzantine readers (pp. 96–7), an attitude that continues in both Greek and Latin sources of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

"The past still present and active in the medieval present" (p. 114) summarizes the message of Chapter 5, "The apogee of the Atheniotissa in the twelfth century." Noting the vibrant coexistence of ancient and medieval structures in Athens, K. provides a similar sense of the overlap between classicizing Byzantine literature and contemporary Athenian life. Although learned authors enjoyed contrasting the glories of classical Athens with its contemporary state, medieval Athens was economically vital; "the universal festival (*pankosmios panegyris*) of the Theometor gathers peoples from every place to Athens," comments the 12<sup>th</sup>-century ecclesiastic Euthymios Malakes (p. 134). Eustathios of Thessalonike, the prolific commentator on Homer, testifies to the significance of the Parthenon for contemporary Athens: "O Attic light, you are enchambered by the enclosure of masonry [i.e., the Parthenon], but still you illuminate and throw out your fire ... that light, which makes Attica famous..." (p. 128). The Parthenon's divine light became part of what K. investigates and terms the "branding" of the Theometor Atheniotissa as a recognizable and significant figure in Byzantine piety.

Chapter 6, "Michael Choniates and his cathedral (AD 1182–1205)," both presents the statements of a Christian immersed in the classical past and creates a striking picture of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Parthenon that was his episcopal seat. Archaeological evidence informs Korres' reconstruction of the apse; 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographs record the traces of frescos that once adorned the church; and Spiridon Lambros' childhood memory of finding "golden stones" at the Parthenon suggests its luminous lost mosaics (pp. 149–53). Choniates praised the Parthenon cathedral itself and noted the miraculous divine presence that blessed it. "Let us then pay honor to this temple," he exhorted his flock, "exquisitely beautiful, well-lit, the graceful place of the light-receiving and light-giving Parthenos, the holy house of the true light that flashes forth from her..." (*Inaugural Address at Athens*; translation on pp. 159–60). After Crusaders captured Constantinople in 1204 and then seized Athens as well, an exiled Choniates grieved for "the holy Akropolis of Athens, my lot in life, and the most holy Parthenon of the Mother of God upon it, which has now become a den of thieves" (p. 164).

The Parthenon symbolized Byzantium's sometimes uneasy self-identity, at once classicizing and Christian, an ambivalence K. explores in Chapter 7, "Why the Parthenon? An attempt at interpretation." As a Christian monument, the Parthenon became the object of a fascination the Byzantines themselves could not articulate. Citing

Derrida's "philosophical deconstruction," K. observes, "The 'true meaning' of the Parthenon was trapped between a discursive Christian element and a non-discursive subliminal supplement that pointed to the monument's non-Christian background" (pp. 175–6). At the same time as 11<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine "cultural tourists" traveled to Athens to visit intact monuments of the classical past such as the Parthenon and the imaginatively identified "Lantern of Demosthenes," a.k.a. the monument of Lysicrates (pp. 181–4), popular interest in Greek antiquity motivated the reuse of classical spolia in Byzantine churches, a phenomenon scholars (including K. himself, he admits) have generally refused to acknowledge.

In conclusion, K. attempts to explain the genesis and nature of "The light of the Christian Parthenon" (Chapter 8), noting the ever-burning lamp reported by Pausanias at the cult statue of Athena Polias and suggesting that a 10<sup>th</sup>-century spirit of antiquarianism revived Pausanias' light and assigned it to the Christian Akropolis. As a literary *topos* the divine light then influenced Byzantine references to Athens.

In "Postscript: some Byzantine heresies," K. expands upon the programmatic theme of his work: that a prejudicial, Euro-centric and anti-Christian bias has denied the Parthenon its real history. The classicizing interventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries harmed the Parthenon's physical fabric more than any Byzantine alterations to the building, but, concludes K., "thankfully it is now finally in the hands of humanists who are also true professional conservators" (p. 210). In "Appendix: the Little Metropolis," K. presents recent scholarship that redates to the 15<sup>th</sup> century the creation of this architectural pastiche, familiar to classicists as the site of the Athenian calendar frieze preserving a representation of the Panathenaic ship. [[3]]

Despite a tendency to overinterpret his sources, K. has produced a readable, thorough and scholarly study of a subject too long declared non-existent.

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[[1]] Cited by K., p. 6 and p. 4.

[[2]] P. 82, translating *Ioannis Skylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. Thurn (1973) 43: 364.

[[3]] Cf. Erika Simon, *Festivals of Attica: An archaeological commentary* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983/2002) p. 6 and pl. 2.