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Opposite
The
Pantokrator,
Christ the
Omnipotent
(detail of 219).
Wall-painting
in the dome of
the church of
the Theotokos,
Lagoudera,
Cyprus

How do you picture God? Should images of Christ show him as young and beardless, or with long dark hair and a curling beard, or as a lamb? How would you recognize St Peter if he appeared to you in a dream? What shape ought a church to be? Inside, what forms of decoration are appropriate? It was questions like these that confronted the people who made and paid for and used the art and architecture of the Early Christian and Byzantine world. The answers they came up with are visible today in surviving buildings and in works of art now often in museums and scattered around the world. But they are also familiar – much more familiar – from later periods, because Early Christian and Byzantine artists invented and defined the Christian tradition in visual representation that dominated European art until recent times. The images and structures they created to embody the visible and invisible worlds of religious experience and belief were visually and intellectually so satisfying that their tradition was maintained, even through periods that sought self-consciously to throw off the burden of the past. This book is about that art – why it was made, how it was viewed, and what we need to do in order to understand it.

From the outset, it is important to bear several factors in mind. First, the timescale that is involved, which spans roughly one and a half millennia, the first three-quarters of the Christian era. Second, the geographical range that is covered, from the beginnings of Christian art in the Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire into its hinterland throughout the Balkans and the Near East, and in due course into areas that had never been Romanized, such as the Christian principalities of Russia. Third, the fact that though much has been destroyed or lost, many important – and vast numbers of lesser – works of art and architecture from this period survive, making any survey necessarily selective as to the examples described, the places visited and the narratives of individuals and ideas that are recounted.

The picture that emerges is one of powerful and intriguing paradox, prompting us to ask how it was possible, through centuries of change and often cataclysmic political upheaval, that the clearly defined artistic traditions of the Byzantine world continued to prevail even up to and beyond the final demise of the Christian empire in the East with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Byzantine art often communicates a profound – if deceptive – sense of continuity in a changeless world-order, with an element of transcendent isolationism; but it must be remembered, too, that in terms of developments in western Europe, the period in question extends from the heyday of the Roman Empire right through the Middle Ages and into the early Renaissance. At certain times and places – as in Sicily under Norman rule in the twelfth century – Byzantine art can clearly be seen in direct relation to foreign ideas and radically different styles, both architectural and artistic.

In approaching this art, we must be aware that certain modern assumptions can stand in the way of an appreciation of what it actually is or represents. As will become clear, even the basic art-historical categories used in this subject can be misleading. For example, what is termed Early Christian art – art making direct reference to New (or Old) Testament themes and/or Christian symbols – does not date back to the time of Christ, but first appeared some two centuries later. Similarly, the term Byzantine, which derives from the name of the ancient Greek colony of Byzantion (latinized as Byzantium) that was refounded by the emperor Constantine as his capital and renamed Constantinople (modern Istanbul), is applied to art and architecture created at widely different times and places, often outside the borders of the 'Byzantine Empire' controlled or laid claim to by the emperors in Constantinople itself.

Most of the people we now describe as 'Byzantines' would have found this term incomprehensible. Constantine and his successors did not think of themselves as 'Byzantine' emperors: to the very end they styled themselves 'Emperor (or King) of the Romans', as heirs to the Roman Empire in the East. They viewed their territories – which over time fluctuated greatly in extent – in terms of this inheritance. The

populace of this world were thus definable as inhabitants of the Roman Empire or one of its successor states, invaders or neighbours. Latin and, from the seventh century, Greek remained the principal languages, as they had been throughout the ancient Mediterranean during the centuries of Roman rule, although many other languages were spoken too.

Because the culture in which the people of those times lived is very remote from our own, a considerable effort is needed if we are not to misjudge what we see. In particular, since Christianity has been such a shaping influence on the Western world-view, we need to be careful not to read the more distant Christian past in terms of modern notions. For these reasons, this book often stresses aspects of the unfamiliar that might easily be glossed over – for example the chosen forms for terminology and names. To anglicize a name from this period, such as 'John' or 'Gregory' (rather than calling the person *Ioannes* or *Gregorios*) may serve to link us to the world of Early Christian or Byzantine saints, but there is a real danger that it makes the past seem reassuringly familiar – which would be a serious mistake. On occasions, therefore, it may be more helpful to give people (and sometimes places) their 'real' names, although complete consistency is more than can be expected. Technical terms too are an important source of possible misapprehension. We could, for example, refer to parts of a Byzantine church as 'the nave' or 'the choir', which would cause the reader no problem. But in many important ways the *naos* or *bema* were not like the nave or choir of an English parish church or French Gothic cathedral – the terms used can be helpful, therefore, in highlighting unfamiliar concepts. Such terms will generally be explained when they first occur (and again in the Glossary).

Although some have looked for and found secular art produced during the centuries covered here, the very concept of 'secular' as 'not concerned with religion' is suspect, except perhaps at the start of this period. The great achievements of Early Christian and Byzantine culture – from church buildings and their mosaic decoration to painted manuscripts, carved ivory panels and cloisonnée enamels –

are overwhelmingly religious in context. But despite the familiarity that Bible stories and Christian imagery retain for some people today, there are many aspects of the theological and intellectual background to Byzantine art that are decidedly foreign to all of us. For example, while we like to think in terms of progress, of things developing and improving over time, the people we shall consider thought in a totally different way: they believed that, as time passed and the world became more distant from the Creation (usually reckoned as a historical event occurring at a date we would cite as 5508 BC) and the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, things were getting steadily worse. Similarly, while we find it comforting to follow the sort of narrative that moves forwards in time and appears to give meaning to a linear sequence of events, the people we seek to understand lived in a mental world of continuous flashbacks: they dreaded the future and the prospect of the Last Judgement, but looked back with admiration to the past, especially the more-or-less distant past.

These attitudes were implicit in their art. Artists did not seek after novelty for its own sake, and to make the innovative acceptable they often had to disguise it as if it were the product of some ancient tradition. Thus they were always involved in a highly complex relationship with the works of their predecessors, and to appreciate their art we too have to be constantly looking back. Moreover, their concept of tradition was far more than a simple respect for established norms. Holy images (icons), for example, were not seen as mere 'artists' impressions' of what Christ or the saints might have looked like: they were held to be versions of 'true' images of these figures and thus to contain or transmit – not just represent – the presence of divinity or supernatural power. Artists were commissioned to produce work that would impress God and the saints by its religious truth, and the cost and beauty of its materials and craftsmanship. These were works made to last and be effective far beyond a lifetime – literally until the end of the world.

Once again, familiar words can disguise unfamiliar concepts. We are used, for example, to referring to – or reading or hearing about – Jesus as 'Christ' (from the Greek translation of 'Messiah', the

Anointed) and Mary as 'the Virgin'. But 'the Virgin' is an epithet scarcely ever used for Mary in the art we shall look at. To the Byzantines, an image of Mary was an image of 'the Mother of God' or of 'the Theotokos'. To refer constantly to the Theotokos as 'the Virgin' may seem unproblematic, but it imposes the prevailing modern idea of the tender Virgin, meek and mild – a perception overlaid with Victorian sentiment – on the complex and powerful figure of the Mother of God whom we shall frequently encounter.

Images like words shape ideas as well as expressing them, and Early Christian and Byzantine art was profoundly ideological. But it was also an art that was made to be gazed at long and passionately. The illustrations that accompany the text that follows were chosen to convey an impression of what this art looks like. But no photograph, however stunning, is a substitute for the original it reproduces. It is my hope, then, that this book will not only help those who read it to think about the art it discusses, but that it will also encourage them to go and look at it. In the meantime, before setting off on that literal or metaphorical journey, there is a final point that it will be helpful to bear in mind. Every image reproduced in this book is visible to exactly the same public or audience as every other. For the people for whom the works reproduced here were originally made, however, the situation could not have been more different: grand public buildings and their decoration were intended to be seen by tens of thousands of viewers every year, whereas some objects were made for the private contemplation of a single individual. 'Public' art would have subtly moulded the ideas of large sections of the population. 'Private' art would have been all but invisible in comparison. We need constantly to bear in mind the differences between present and past viewing conditions, although not, I think, so as to regret them. It is our great good fortune as modern viewers to be able within the compass of this book effortlessly to climb over barriers and look behind locked doors, to open museum cases and peer inside precious reliquaries, to turn the pages of priceless books and approach close up to jealously guarded images, to ascend scaffolding with restorers and photographers, to jump vast distances in time and space, and to see all this art together.



32
Land walls of
Theodosius II,
Istanbul,
412/13

In 325 the emperor Constantine called an ecumenical council (a meeting of the bishops 'of all the world') with the purpose of standardizing Church doctrine and policy. It was held at the city of Nicaea (modern Iznik in Turkey), near the Eastern imperial residence at Nicomedia (modern Izmit). Among the decisions of the Council of Nicaea was that the bishops of Antioch, Alexandria and Rome – the great urban centres of the time – were to be given jurisdiction over provinces, and the special status of the bishopric of Jerusalem was also recognized. In 381, however, when an ecumenical council was convened by Emperor Theodosius I, it took place at Constantinople and its Third Canon declared boldly: 'The Bishop of Constantinople shall have the precedence of honour after the Bishop of Rome, because Constantinople is New Rome.' Slowly through the fourth and fifth centuries Constantinople grew in importance as it gradually became the epicentre of imperial activity, and associated trade, commerce, patronage and prestige, while its rivals (and especially 'Old' Rome) declined. By the beginning of the sixth century it was indisputably the most important urban centre in the Western world, a position it maintained for some seven centuries, until sacked by the Crusaders in 1204 (see Chapter 9). Throughout this period the centre of gravity of the Roman Empire became ever more firmly established in Constantinople, and the divisions between the empire's Eastern and Western provinces became increasingly marked.

Constantine's scheme to create a city to rival and surpass in magnificence the ancient cities of the Mediterranean world was continued enthusiastically by his successors. The emperors Theodosius I (r.379–95) and Arcadius (r.395–408) even erected enormous public columns carved with narrative scenes of their achievements like those of the emperors Trajan or Marcus Aurelius in Rome itself. And statues were still being brought from Classical (*ie* pagan) temples in the reign of the emperor Justinian (r.527–65), who removed the

horses from the Temple of Artemis (Diana) at Ephesus – one of the Seven Wonders of the World. At the same time as removing pagan statuary to beautify Constantinople, however, the emperors became increasingly intolerant of pagan practices. Theodosius I, for example, prohibited all pagan cult activities in 392, and Justinian closed the Academy of Athens, the last pagan philosophical school, in 529.

The most conspicuous surviving signs of Constantinople's rapid growth from the later fourth century onwards are its land walls (32), which were laid out by the emperor Theodosius II in 412/13. They enclosed a vastly greater area than Constantine or his planners had envisaged. Even the sprawling development of modern Istanbul (as the city is now called) cannot disguise the massive scale of these works. But (as in Rome) the very success of Constantinople/Istanbul has meant that the layers of its early history have been frequently disturbed. For example, the monolithic columns which are now found in the mosque of Mehmed the Conqueror (Fatih Camii) support an eighteenth-century reconstruction of a fifteenth-century building on the site of a sixth-century rebuilding of Constantine's fourth-century church of the Holy Apostles, and they were probably originally shipped to Constantinople after removal from some pagan temple. As a result of reconstructions such as these, the early history of Constantinople and its buildings can only be partially recovered.

After Constantine himself, it is the name of the emperor Justinian that is most permanently linked with the history of Constantinople. Justinian was the nephew of the emperor Justin I (r. 518–27), and both were from Balkan peasant stock. He was a person of vision and extraordinary energy, both intensely pious and utterly ruthless. Justinian's active and partially successful – but enormously costly – policy was to reconquer and restore the Roman Empire's former borders. Not only was there the traditional enemy in the form of the Persian Empire in the east, but the devastating invasions of the fifth century by the Goths, Huns, Vandals and other peoples had removed most of western Europe and North Africa from imperial control (see also Chapter 3). Justinian's military ambitions were matched by his grandiose building programme, and both are recorded in the writ-

ings of Procopius, from whom Justinian commissioned not only an official history of his various wars but an entire volume lavishly praising his building works. (Procopius also wrote a lengthy private memoir, the *Anekdotai* or *Secret History*, in which he attacked the personality and actions of Justinian and his wife Theodora in the most outspoken terms: the resulting combination of invective, prurience and hypocrisy has proved popular with modern readers.) The volume is called the *Buildings* (sometimes given the Latin title *De Aedificiis*, although it was written in Greek) and is an extraordinary record of the imperially-directed construction of churches, monasteries, hostels, roads, bridges, aqueducts, monuments, fortifications, towns and even entire cities (two were named Justiniana and three Justinianopolis). Book I of the *Buildings* is devoted to Justinian's works in Constantinople and its suburbs, and Procopius begins with the one building that was clearly intended to surpass all others – the church of St Sophia.

The cathedral church of Constantinople, the church containing the *cathedra* (seat or throne) of the city's bishop, was not dedicated to a saint or in commemoration of an event in Christ's life, but to an idea or attribute of God, namely Wisdom (and hence to Christ as the embodiment of God's Wisdom). The name Hagia Sophia literally means 'Holy Wisdom', although the church is generally referred to as St Sophia, and in the Byzantine period was often called simply 'the Great Church'. Near it is a church dedicated to Holy Peace, Hagia Eirene (or St Irene), which must always have formed a sort of pair with St Sophia. Of the first church of St Sophia, dedicated in 360 by Emperor Constantius (son of Constantine), only the site survives, for it was burned down in rioting in 404. The church was rebuilt by Emperor Theodosius II and rededicated in 415. This second St Sophia (along with St Irene) was itself destroyed in a fire started during rioting that began in the city's Hippodrome in January 532. The building that survives today (now no longer a church but a museum and previously a mosque) is in large part the St Sophia erected on Justinian's orders in 532–7, and shares with its predecessors the name, the site, and presumably parts of the substructures.



33
St Sophia,
Istanbul,
532-7 and
later.
Interior
looking east.
The church
has been
converted for
use as a
mosque

St Sophia is an unrivalled architectural achievement for the sheer daring of its design (33). It is no accident, therefore, that, unusually for Byzantine architecture, the names of its designers were recorded: Isidoros of Miletos and Anthemios of Tralles. Both were mathematicians in the Greco-Roman tradition. Isidoros edited the works of Archimedes, as well as writing a commentary on the technical treatise on vaults by an earlier mathematician, Heron (or Hero) of Alexandria (first century AD). Both made studies of parabolas and curved surfaces. Their plan involved placing a vast dome on a square base of 30.95 m (assumed to be 100 Byzantine feet), supported at a height of some 41.5 m (c. 136 Byzantine feet) above the centre of the church. The thrust of this dome is carried on four great arches. Beneath the arches to north and south are semicircular tympana originally pierced by enormous windows (the present windows are much smaller). The tympana are themselves supported by two-storey arcades. To east and west, the area below the arches is extended by 'semidomes'. The lower parts of these semidomes are then opened out further to east and west by arches and smaller semidomes. The result is a vast space in which the curving surfaces of arcades, arches, window-heads and vaults create an effect of extraordinary lightness and movement above a floor which, although basically rectangular, is so modified by curving exedras (niches) and views into the flanking aisles that its precise shape is impossible to comprehend at ground level. Although the dome collapsed in 558, and was rebuilt by 562 with a greater curvature so as to rise higher by some 7 m (23 ft) or more, and further partial collapses have taken place over the centuries (according to legend the church has withstood more than a thousand earthquakes), the essential plan and a large part of the structure that survive are those of 532-7.

St Sophia is a supreme example of the creation of that spacious and light-filled interior which since the fourth century had been the principal requirement of church architecture. The building's exterior, now plastered, painted, buttressed and dominated by minarets (and in appearance a source of bewilderment to modern visitors), was scarcely more than the husk within which the precious interior could be created and by which it would be protected. The dome, semi-



34-35
St Sophia,
Istanbul
Left
Interior
looking south
Right
Detail of
capital with
monogram

domes and vaults, despite the enormous forces they created and the exceptional technical problems of their construction, enabled a far wider and more open basilical layout than would have been possible had even the longest roof timbers been employed. (The gigantic dome of Hadrian's temple of the Pantheon, completed by 128AD, or the vaults of the civil Basilica Nova of Maxentius, completed by Constantine – both in Rome – are sometimes cited as precedents for St Sophia, but there are no historical links.) The combination in St Sophia of horizontal and vertical axes within the building was interpreted by contemporaries in a variety of allegorical ways. In particular, the central dome, suspended from heaven as it seemed to the viewer beneath (we are told), was likened to the dome of heaven itself. So powerful was this image, found also in descriptions of other domed sixth-century churches, that it came to dominate the entire architectural tradition of the Byzantine world. In later centuries even the simplest rural chapel was usually planned and constructed around a central dome. The church interior came to be regarded as not merely a microcosm, but as a view of heaven and of divine order.

Much of the sixth-century decoration of St Sophia survives. Up to the level where the arches that support the central dome begin, the wall surfaces were revetted with panels of gleaming coloured marble, and the arcades with coloured inlays. While the columns that support the arcades were spolia from ancient buildings, carefully selected for the decorative quality of their marble (34), their capitals were new, and were treated as surfaces for decoration, with the stonework heavily drilled so as to leave a delicate pattern of acanthus leaves surrounding monograms of the names Justinian (35) and Theodora. The Ionic volutes are the only forms that are reminiscent of the Classical capital, and here, in a context very different from that of Greco-Roman architecture, they look somewhat incongruous. The decoration of the upper parts of the building was in mosaic; in the sixth century this is thought to have consisted largely of plain gold grounds ornamented with a cross in the dome, and crosses or other types of non-figurative decoration elsewhere.



Contemporary descriptions reveal that there were religious images in Justinian's St Sophia, but that they were much closer to the viewer than placing them on the vaults would have allowed. We are told, in a highly rhetorical description of the church after its rededication in 562, that the area around the apse and gold altar was not only revetted in silver but also contained large-scale silver figures (replacing the silver decoration of the same area destroyed by the collapse of the dome in 558). The text's author, Paul the Silentiary, says:

Elsewhere the sharp steel has fashioned those former heralds of God by whose words, before God had taken on flesh, the divine tidings of Christ's coming spread abroad [*ie* the prophets]. Nor has the artist forgotten the images of those who abandoned the mean labours of their life – the fishing basket and the net – and those evil cares in order to follow the command of the heavenly King [*ie* the disciples], fishing even for men and, instead of casting for fish, spread out the nets of eternal life. And elsewhere art has depicted the Mother of Christ, the vessel of eternal life, whose holy womb did nourish its own Maker.

As is often the case, this written description gives no idea of what such figures actually looked like. But it appears that this type of silver decoration followed a tradition dating back to the time of Constantine, as exemplified in the description of the Lateran from the *Liber Pontificalis*.

For a long time no other major contemporary buildings with which to compare the architecture and decoration of Justinian's St Sophia were known in Constantinople. Then, in the 1960s, excavations in the city brought to light the enormously strong foundations and some decorative elements from a church identified as that of St Polyeuktos. This building was erected by Anicia Juliana, a wealthy aristocrat with imperial connections over generations, adjacent to her own palace, probably around 524–7. The church may have had a central dome, some 17m (56ft) in diameter, but this remains uncertain. Its sculpture is of a type with parallels in St Sophia and (as we shall see in Chapter 3) at Ravenna, and some of its larger decorated elements were considered sufficiently remarkable to be shipped to

Venice after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 (see Chapter 9) and set up outside or built into the west façade of St Mark's (36). In order to prevent her wealth falling into the hands of Justinian, who had requested a 'contribution' to the imperial treasury, Juliana is said to have used it ('my poverty' she called it) to gild the roof of St Polyeuktos. And Justinian, it has been proposed, was not merely trying to surpass Solomon – the Old Testament king who built the Temple at Jerusalem – in his building works at St Sophia, but also to outdo Juliana's church of St Polyeuktos.

Although the world of a sixth-century inhabitant of the Byzantine Empire was still characterized as in previous centuries by great cities, there had also been impressive building projects in rural areas, associated with the growth of interest in monasticism, and the need to cope with crowds of pilgrims and would-be baptizands who travelled to sites made holy by the presence of saints or their relics. The Greek word *monachos* (monk) originally meant 'single' or 'solitary', and the

36
Sculpted pier
from
St Polyeuktos,
Constantinople,
524–7, reused,
Piazzetta,
Venice

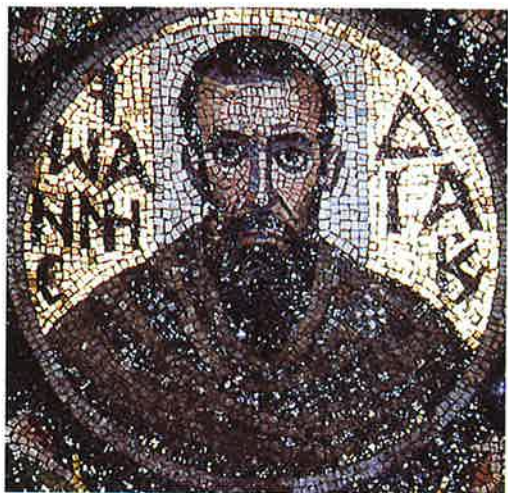


first monks were hermits in Egypt who retired from the temptations of the world to pursue their religious life in solitude. Their prototype was St Anthony, who retreated into the desert c. 285 and around whom a community had already formed by c. 305. As these monks attracted followers and imitators, monasteries to enable a communal monastic life were established throughout the Christian world in the fourth century and later.

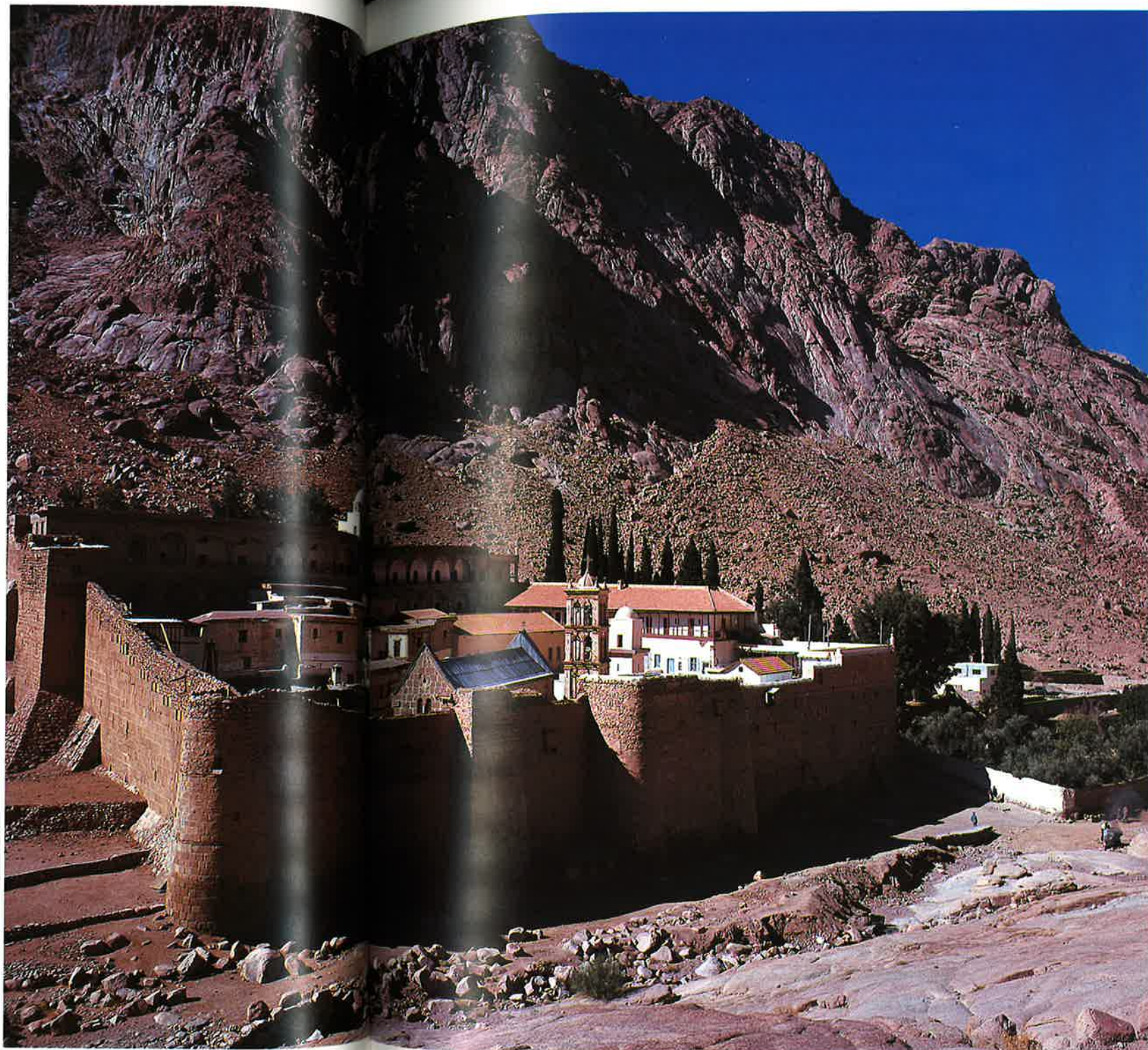
An intriguing case of monasticism and pilgrimage is provided by Qalat Seman in Syria, in the hills some 75 km (46 miles) northeast of Antioch. St Symeon (d. 459) was an ascetic who spent his last thirty-six years living on top of a column, which was periodically increased in height until some 16 m (52 ft) tall. He was the first stylite saint (from the Greek *stylos*, a pillar or column), and the cult of devotion that grew up around him in his lifetime, attracting pilgrims from as far afield as Britain, increased after his death. It brought sufficient prosperity to enable the construction, probably with the support of Emperor Zeno (r. 476–91), of a four-armed basilica, baptistery and other major buildings around his site, even though his body had been removed under the guard of 600 soldiers to Antioch. The adjacent town, Deir Siman, had huge buildings erected to cope (it is thought) with the pilgrim traffic; from here pilgrims proceeded through a triumphal arch to the holy site. The main church was oriented (*ie* faced east), but Symeon's column provided the central focus at the meeting of the four basilical arms (37). Presumably this space was covered with a wooden conical roof, perhaps with a large oculus (eye) above the column, keeping it open to light, the elements and heaven; however, it was left completely open after the roofing collapsed in 528. Symeon achieved a worldwide fame for his holy life and posthumous miracles, and further stylite saints ascended columns in emulation of his ascetic feats – including one hardy individual in the much chillier region near Cologne. And in Rome craftsmen are said to have had images of Symeon on his column in their workshops. These were perhaps locally made imitations of the type of badge-like tokens that were brought back by pilgrims. Such tokens were a means by which art and ideas were transmitted over long distances in these centuries.

37
The cruciform church of St Symeon, Qalat Seman, Syria, c. 476–90. Viewed from the northeast





39–40
St Catherine's
Monastery,
Sinai
Above
Apse mosaic,
John the
Deacon
(detail), c.565/6
Right
General view
of monastery



The mosaicists and their materials were certainly dispatched to Sinai from elsewhere, but unlike the marble, they may not have come from the region of Constantinople. As it happens such a long journey would have been unnecessary. Justinian had sponsored major programmes of building and reconstruction in the churches of the Holy Land, and doubtless these included mosaic decorations. The eastern part of the Constantinian Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, for example, was vastly increased in size, while in Jerusalem Justinian built the enormous Nea (New) Church, dedicated to the Theotokos (he sent an architect named Theodoros). It is most likely, therefore, that the craftsmen employed at Sinai came from a nearby centre such as Jerusalem. The architect was certainly local, for his name was recorded on one of the roof beams: Stephanos of Aila (modern Aqaba in Jordan).

The initial reason for choosing the Transfiguration as the principal image for the church, even though it was dedicated to the Theotokos, was presumably because it provided a biblical link between Moses and Christ, emphasized by the fact that both the events depicted had mountain settings. The existence of a cult of Elijah at Mt Sinai must have reinforced this choice. But the image of the Transfiguration as executed in mosaic uses a gold background to deny any terrestrial connection, in contrast to the landscape background in the Moses scenes on the upper wall. It emphasizes a crucial theological point by affirming the duality of Christ, who was able not only to be man and God at the same time, but was perceived by men (the apostles) as such in the Transfiguration.

The precise nature of Christ as God and man had been a matter of bitter controversy in the Church since the fourth century. Constantine had summoned the Council at Nicaea in 325 to define the orthodox view and to condemn as heretical the followers of the priest Arius, who held that Christ had been created by God, and was therefore not truly divine by nature (Arianism). The Council of Constantinople in 381 was intended to unite the Church after the defeat of Arianism. The Council held at Chalcedon, near Constantinople, called by the emperor Marcian in 451 was intended to remove (but had the effect

of hardening) the monophysite heresy, which in some senses reversed the central tenet of Arianism. Monophysites held that Christ was divine by nature, but did not become also fully human by nature after the Incarnation. Monophysitism was prevalent in large parts of the empire, notably in the region stretching southwards in an arc from Armenia through Syria to Egypt. The Sinai Transfiguration mosaic, therefore, may well have been intended as a statement of orthodox belief in Christ's divine and human natures. Nonetheless, it is possible that a monophysite might have viewed the preponderance of gold mosaic as supporting a monophysite position. That images were viewed in these ways as arguments in complex theological debates cannot be doubted.

The eighteenth-century Russian iconostasis (icon screen) that now obscures the view of the east end of the church at Sinai, or the nineteenth-century koranic inscriptions that are so conspicuous in the interior of St Sophia, make it hard to reconstruct an idea of the magnificent fixtures, fittings and portable objects that would have been used and displayed in such buildings. While the silver revetment of the altar area of St Sophia does not survive, a number of hoards of sixth-century church silver have been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean, and these, like the architecture of such sites as Qalat Seman, testify to extraordinary wealth. Doubtless, too, the wealthiest private households continued to have silver dishes, bowls, etc., as they had in previous centuries.

A treasure of superlative craftsmanship said to have been found at Kumluca, near Antalya on the south coast of Turkey, consists of numerous silver patens and chalices (the plates and cups used for the bread and wine in the Eucharist), with inscriptions recording their donation to a church called Holy Sion by a Bishop Eutychianos and others (41). There are also complicated *polykandela* (candelabra) of different shapes to be hung from silver chains (recalling Constantine's donations to the Lateran), silver crosses, silver book-covers, and even the sheets of silver used to cover an altar. Sets of control marks, stamped into the silver when it was shaped but not worked, indicate that these objects were made in the years around 570.

A silver paten said to have been found near the village of Riha, some 55 km (34 miles) southeast of Antioch, was executed in a repoussé (hammered) technique to show the image known as the Communion of the Apostles (42) – an appropriate choice. The biblical description of Christ's Last Supper (Matthew 26:26–8) is here reinterpreted with Christ as a priest, ministering to the congregation of apostles from an altar. At the left is the offering of wine, and at the right of bread. The surrounding inscription records that the paten was presented



'For the repose [of the souls] of Sergia, [daughter] of Ioannes, and of Theodosios [ie these two were deceased] and the salvation of Megas and Nonnos and of their children'. Megas was a high-ranking imperial official, and control stamps suggest a date of 577 for the paten. It has been proposed that the other liturgical objects shown on the paten represent further donations by Megas, and that even the conspicuous epistyle (behind and above the figures) could represent a silver revetment given by him to the church.

It is striking that such church treasures are almost exclusively of silver, rather than of gold. This reflects not merely the much larger quantity of silver in circulation at the time, but the fact that gold (and not silver) was required by the imperial mints for coinage.



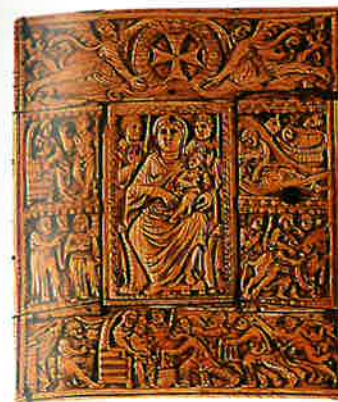
41
Paten from the
Sion Treasure,
c.570.
Silver;
diam. 60.5 cm,
23½ in.
Dumbarton
Oaks,
Washington,
DC

42
The Riha Paten
showing the
Communion
of the Apostles,
577.
Silver;
diam.
35 cm, 13¾ in.
Dumbarton
Oaks,
Washington,
DC



43
Christ and
the Theotokos
and Child
with saints
and angels,
6th century.
Ivory diptych;
panels
29×13 cm,
11½×5¼ in.
Staatliche
Museen, Berlin

Ivory was another relatively precious commodity which was used in civil but also in religious contexts. Ivory diptychs consisting of two tall carved panels joined by hinges were issued by the consuls (civic officials, though much altered from the consuls of republican Rome) who continued to play an administrative role until 541. They were normally carved with a generic image of a consul, beneath an inscription with the man's name and titles. These so-called consular diptychs are paralleled in form by diptychs of, for example, Christ and the Theotokos (43). The latter were presumably intended to stand on altars during the liturgy. In this example (now in Berlin) there is an interesting contrast between the heavily bearded and strongly modelled heads of the seemingly aged Christ, Peter and Paul on one wing, and the soft, fleshy, unlined faces of Mary, the angels and the Christ Child (much worn) on the other. These differences are best understood as deliberate features testifying to the craftsman's skill. It makes no sense to suppose that the figures look different because the diptych wings were carved by different hands.



44
The Theotokos
and Child with
saints and angels,
6th century.
Reused as the
cover of the
10th-century
Etchmiadzin
Gospels.
Ivory; panels
36.5×30.5 cm,
14½×12 in.
Matenadaran,
Yerevan, Armenia

A characteristic development of such diptychs seems to have involved their use as book-covers (44). Because the shape of an elephant's tusk precludes the cutting of a rectangular panel of more than a certain width, it was necessary to assemble such covers from a number of smaller panels, usually five (unless a tall narrow book was made). This assembly in turn suggested a compositional arrangement, with Christ or Mary remaining in the centre (for the front and back of the book), and angels, apostles, saints or smaller-scale figures in scenes in the flanking panels. Regrettably, even when such covers survive, they are no longer on the books they were made for.

It is not now possible to estimate the relative cost of a silver or ivory cover for a book, as against the materials and workmanship of the pages within, but there is no disputing the fact that the few books from the sixth century that do survive are among the most carefully and expensively executed of any period. The number of books we have, especially when compared to the number of ecclesiastical buildings, whether ruined or not, is very small. Of course there must once have been many more, but it needs to be borne in mind that it was exactly those books which were thought most important by later generations that stood the best chance of being preserved – saved from a fire, ransomed, or even treasured as a relic because of their association (genuine or assumed) with some saint. The more ordinary, workaday books that were in frequent use would have been replaced as they wore out.

The sorts of books that were decorated and illustrated with images at this time were almost exclusively biblical – especially the Gospels, but also for some reason the Book of Genesis. Books were written by hand, by highly skilled calligraphers, on the specially treated animal skin known as parchment (Greek *pergamene*, from the supposed origin of the process in the city of Pergamon). Although we often call them manuscripts, to distinguish handwritten from printed books, to contemporaries in this age before printing they were simply books. The most costly and ostentatious treatment a book could receive (excepting a single fragmentary case in which the parchment was entirely covered in gold leaf) was for it to be written in letters of silver or gold on parchment that had been dyed with the *purpura* dyestuff usually employed for textiles, and at this period reserved for imperial use (45). These books are generally referred to as ‘purple codices’ (Latin *codex* meaning ‘book’, as distinct from roll or scroll), which is misleading if we imagine that this describes a particular colour of parchment, for the *purpura* dye can produce a wide range of intense tones between a deep blue and a deep red (when not faded by prolonged exposure to light). The pages of these books never equate with our modern notion of the single colour ‘purple’.

The Rossano Gospels is a purple manuscript preserved in the treasury of the cathedral of Rossano in southern Italy (it is not known how or when it got there). Its images are gathered together as frontispieces. Most characteristic are the scenes from the life of Christ, which occupy the upper part of the page. These are observed from below by gesticulating figures holding scrolls on which texts are written. The observers are identified by inscriptions as Old Testament authors, and the texts they hold are quotations from their works that can be taken to prophesy the New Testament event seen above. As is appropriate to their context in a book, these images cannot be properly understood unless the viewer reads as well as looks. But what he or she reads is not ‘the story’ of what is being illustrated, or even an explanation of the event, but a piece of religious argument, emphasizing the true nature of Christ (the Messiah) as the one who had been foretold in the Jewish scriptures.



45
The Raising of Lazarus, with prophets below, folio 1r (facsimile), Rossano Gospels, 6th century. 30.7 × 26 cm, 12 × 10½ in (page). Rossano Cathedral Treasury

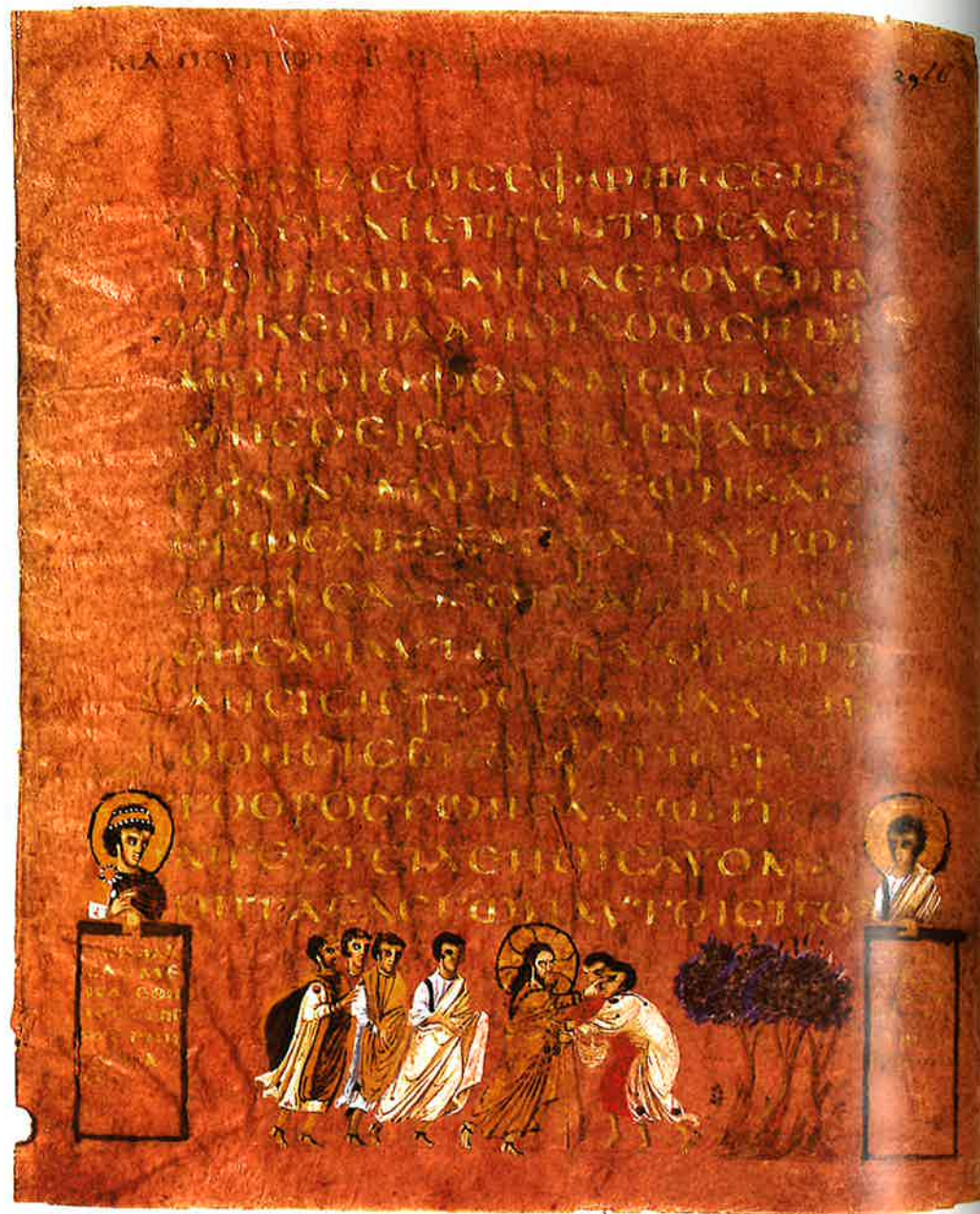
The only way to understand how this art works, therefore, is to both look and read. For example, the image of the Raising of Lazarus (told in John 11:1–44) shows Mary at Christ’s feet (verse 32) and the stinking swathed corpse of Lazarus in his tomb-cave (verse 39). Below, reading from left to right, are David, Hosea, David and Isaiah. The short texts they hold comment on the Raising of Lazarus as follows (note that the Greek Old Testament – the Septuagint – often differs slightly but significantly in wording, and in its verse and chapter divisions, from familiar English versions. There is a greater problem of accessibility even to a text like the Bible than might at first seem to be the case):

[David] The Lord kills and makes alive; he brings down to Hades [or: to the grave] and brings up. [I Kings 2:4]

[Hosea] I will deliver them out of the power of Hades, and will redeem them from death. [Hosea 13:14]

[David] Rejoice in God who alone does wonders. [compare Psalm 71:18]

[Isaiah] The dead shall rise, and they that are in their tombs shall be raised. [Isaiah 26:19]



46
Christ Heals
Two Blind Men,
folio 29r,
Sinope
Gospels,
6th century.
30 × 25 cm.
11 1/4 × 9 1/2 in.
(page).
Bibliothèque
Nationale, Paris

It can now be seen that the prophets holding their scrolls must be imagined as speaking the words written on them. We the viewers have to recreate this act by speaking the prophets' words ourselves.

A fragment (46) of an even more magnificent Gospel Book was found in the late nineteenth century at Sinop (ancient Sinope) on the Black Sea coast of what is now Turkey (the book is in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). We do not know what prefatory images the book might have had, for this part is lost, but it included images in the lower margins of some of the pages of Gospel text. The formula employed resembles the Rossano Gospels by including Old Testament authors displaying prophetic excerpts from their texts to accompany a New Testament scene. The story illustrated is that of Jesus' healing of two blind men near Jericho (Matthew 20:29–34). This text ends on the page we see, six lines up from the image. Jesus in a golden robe stretches out his hand to touch the men's eyes (verse 34). The figure at the left is David (beardless in this image) who holds the text: 'You have fashioned me and have laid your hand upon me' (Psalm 138:5). The youthful beardless figure at the right must be Isaiah, to judge by the text he holds (there is no inscription). It reads: 'Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened' (Isaiah 35:5). In this case, therefore, the image functions more obviously as an illustration, since it is near the text that narrates the event, but it also comments on and interprets that event at the same time. The viewer is actively involved in this process, for he or she must read and speak and think about the words on the page.

The Vienna Genesis (47–8) is another book on purple-dyed parchment, arranged in yet another way. (Its name derives from its present location, in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna.) Each page is divided in two, with a section of the Book of Genesis above, and a large image below. Some of the artists who worked on this book (there were certainly several) painted over the purple-dyed ground entirely so as to provide an illusionistic setting with a foreground receding to misty mountains and a cloudy sky. But the spatial organization of the paintings is less than convincing – the aged Jacob, for example, is seated in what appears to be the middle

47–48
Overleaf
Vienna Genesis,
6th century.
33.5 × 25 cm,
13 1/4 × 9 1/2 in (page).
Österreichische
Nationalbibliothek,
Vienna
Left
Rebekah and
Abraham's Servant,
p.13
Right
Jacob Blesses the
Sons of Joseph,
p.45

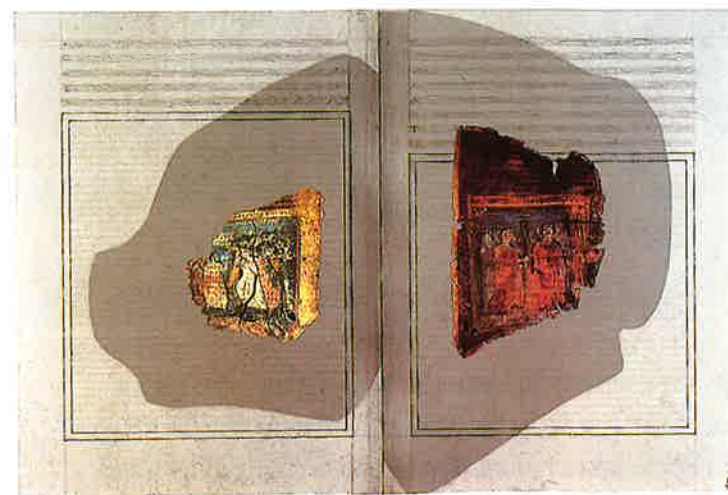
distance as he crosses his hands to bless Joseph's sons (Genesis 48:14). Some of the images have a simple centralized arrangement, but in others the viewer's eye is led around the image by the figures, following the direction implied by the narrative above from one event to the next. In one example (47) Rebekah sets out from the city with her pitcher upon her shoulder (Genesis 24:15); she then draws water from the well (note the personification pouring water from an urn), and gives it to Abraham's servant and to his ten camels (compare verse 10).

In the Vienna Genesis book there are no captions or inscriptions: each page must be read and viewed entire if its art is to be understood. But in this case the viewer had to do more. There are elements in some of the images that are not found in the biblical text, such as the presence of Joseph's wife in the scene of blessing (48). These suggest that the artist, or possibly some adviser, knew of stories and legends elaborating on the Bible, some of which derive ultimately from Jewish writings. Was the viewer also supposed to know this non-biblical material? Although this question cannot be answered, the issues it raises are intriguing.

Less costly in terms of materials perhaps, but far more ambitious in terms of its sheer number of images, is another illustrated book (49) containing only Genesis, called the Cotton Genesis after the seventeenth-century English collector Sir Robert Cotton (now in the British Library, London). This book was largely destroyed in a terrible fire in 1731, but enough survives to enable it to be reconstructed in the mind's eye as a large volume of more than 440 pages (for Genesis alone!) with some 339 framed images, painted in spaces of varying sizes that had been left in the text when it was written. A reconstruction drawing (50), shows how the pages shrank to about half their original size as a result of the heat of the fire. So far as we can tell, Genesis was never again treated to such a profusion of illustrations as in this book.

By the sixth century there were well-established Christian communities in the Byzantine world, or on its borders, which had developed liturgies in their own languages: notably the Georgian, Armenian,

49–50
Cotton Genesis,
late 5th–early
6th century.
British Library,
London
Above
God Introduces
Eve to Adam,
folio 3r,
13.6 × 8.8 cm,
5½ × 3½ in
Below
Reconstruction
to show
shrinkage of two
of the pages
as the result of
fire damage



Syriac and Coptic (Egyptian) churches. Their art probably took its lead from Greek Byzantine examples, although in architectural terms the situation is not so readily defined. The most lavishly illustrated book to have survived from these linguistically non-Greek contexts is the Gospels in Syriac made by the priest Rabbula (as he tells us) in and for the monastery of Bet Mar Yohannan (St John) at Zagba, perhaps in the same region southeast of Antioch as the Riha Paten (see 42). This book (51), which was finished in 586, is now in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana in Florence. To the range of ideas we have already encountered as to how to provide images in a text, the Rabbula Gospels adds further types of frontispiece: full-page framed images of New Testament events, such as the Choosing of Matthias to join the Eleven (Acts 1:15–26), the Ascension and Pentecost; a separate image of the Mother of God and Child; a donor image showing (unidentified) monks in the presence of an enthroned Christ presenting him with a book (*ie* this book); and Canon Tables – tables of concordances between parallel passages in the various Gospels, set out in richly decorated arcades, and flanked by small marginal images of biblical figures, events and authors.

It is worth noting that, although the manuscript of Rabbula is a Gospel Book, the three full-page images it includes from the story of Christ are all of events recounted in Acts, not in the Gospels themselves. Furthermore, in the Ascension the composition is focused on the central figure of Mary, who stands in an orant (praying) pose. Yet Mary was not present at the Ascension according to Acts. None of these images, then, is a simple illustration of an accompanying text. They are making wider points about Christian ideas and beliefs. They also serve to remind the viewer of the great festivals of the church year. And they probably recall the images that decorated church interiors at the time.

The chances of any book without an obvious connection with the Church surviving from the sixth century are extremely small, because only the Church as an institution has survived from that time, however changed. The book in Vienna (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek) generally known as the Vienna Dioskurides is thus a

51
The Ascension,
folio 13v,
Rabbula
Gospels, 586.
33.6 × 26.6 cm,
13 1/4 × 10 1/2 in
(page).
Biblioteca
Medicea-
Laurenziana,
Florence

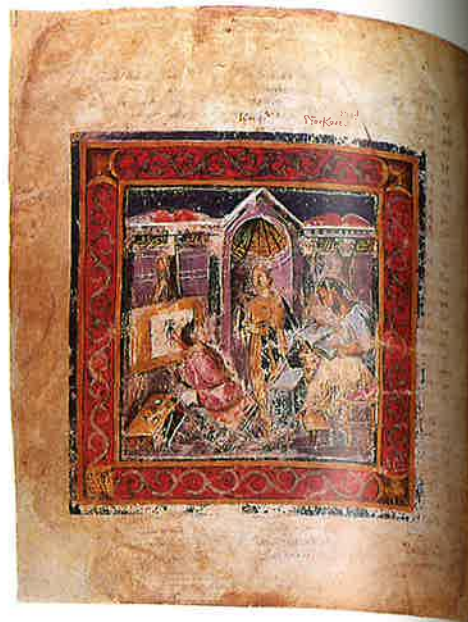




52
Vienna
Dioskurides,
Violet,
folio 148v,
c.512.
38×33 cm,
15×13 in
(page).
Österreichische
Nationalbiblio-
thek, Vienna

remarkable exception. It is a huge volume of herbal, medical and scientific lore, containing almost 1,000 pages and illustrated with 498 images, mostly of plants, but also of birds, snakes and other creatures. The execution of the plant images, in particular, is astonishingly true to nature (52). A series of frontispieces shows the writers of the various texts, notably Dioskurides (the author of the herbal) accompanied first by a personification of Heuresis (Invention or Discovery) who holds a mandrake, and then by an artist who paints the example of the plant held by a personification of Epinoia (Thought), on a sheet pinned to a large board on a tripod easel, while Dioskurides writes about it (53). The book's recipient is also shown on a full-page (54): she is identified by silver letters on purple panels as Iouliana, that is Juliana Anicia, the wealthy Constantinopolitan lady of imperial family who rebuilt the church of St Polyeuktos. The image of the princess enthroned between personifications of Magnanimity and Prudence bears a striking resemblance to the standard image of the Mother of God between two angels (as in 43, for example). The book, we are informed, was a thank-offering by the people of the town of Honoratai, near Constantinople, for whom Juliana had built a church of the Mother of God before 512. An unexplained issue is why this particular book should have been given to Juliana; a gold and purple Gospel Book, for example, might seem a more obvious gift for a church's imperial foundress.

The bishops, priests, monks and lay congregations in fifth- and sixth-century churches must have been familiar with holy images of Christ and the saints, and events from the Old and New Testaments, not only through large-scale painting and mosaic on the walls and vaults, and the smaller-scale silver and ivory objects, books and textiles (of which examples have been discovered, notably in Egypt), but through paintings on wooden panels. We know about these not just from written sources but also from the preservation of a small number of examples, primarily at St Catherine's Monastery on Mt Sinai, believed to date from the sixth or sixth-seventh century. These images (icons: the term is considered further in Chapter 4) are painted with a skill that gives them an extraordinarily direct and powerful contact with the viewer.

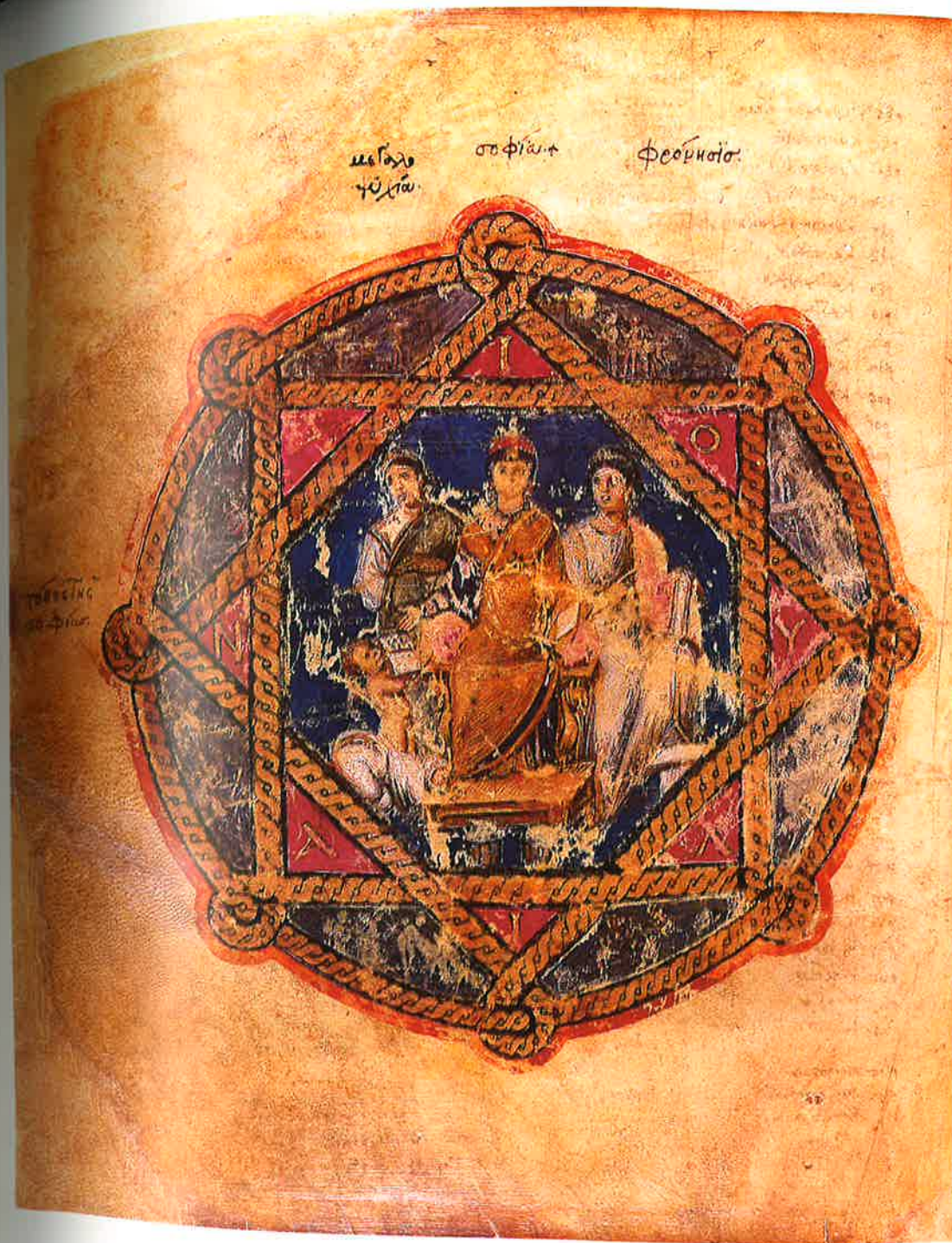


The image (55) known as the Sinai Christ is approximately life-size (the panel measures 84×45.5 cm, 33×18 in). The strongly asymmetrical face confronts the viewer through an intense gaze. The flesh, especially around the eyes, is very carefully modelled, whereas the hair and beard are treated more impressionistically. The paint surface of the drapery is not in its original condition, but the bulky volume that Christ holds has a jewel and pearl-encrusted cover of a type that a viewer might have seen displayed on an altar.

A slightly larger panel (92.8×53.1 cm, $36\frac{1}{2} \times 21$ in) depicts the image of the Sinai St Peter, identifiable by the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19) that he holds in his right hand (56). It is treated somewhat differently: the pigments have been thickly applied to the face to suggest an older man with weatherbeaten features, and bold highlights decorate large areas of the surface in contrast to the sombre lighting of the Christ. The image is completed by three small medallions above: Christ in the centre flanked, it is thought, by St John (the evangelist) and Mary.

A third Sinai panel, of the Theotokos and Child with saints and angels (57), is on a smaller scale (68.5×49.7 cm, $27 \times 19\frac{1}{2}$ in), and is complete

53-54
Vienna
Dioskurides,
c.512.
 38×33 cm,
 15×13 in
(page).
Österreichische
Nationalbibliothek, Vienna
Above
Dioskurides
at work,
folio 5v
Right
Juliana Anicia,
folio 6v





on all sides. It must originally have performed a somewhat different function from the Christ and the St Peter. Here it is the military saints, probably St Theodore (at the left) and St George, who through their frontal gaze make contact with the viewer. In contrast, the Theotokos turns her eyes away, while the condition of the paint surface makes the direction of the Christ Child's gaze uncertain. The two angels behind turn their heads and look up towards heaven, from which a hand of God blesses the central pair. This is presumably an image of prayer: the viewer appeals to the saints to intercede with



55–57
Painted wooden
panels,
St Catherine's
Monastery, Sinai
Opposite far left
Christ,
6th century.
84 × 45.5 cm,
33 × 18 in
Opposite left
St Peter,
6th century
or early 7th
century.
92.8 × 53.1 cm,
36 1/2 × 21 in
Left
The Theotokos
and Child,
with saints
and angels,
6th century.
68.5 × 49.7 cm,
27 × 19 1/2 in

Mary who, as the Mother of God, will be able to appeal to Christ. His right hand probably made a gesture of blessing. But it could also be an image of protection: the saints will be vigilant in their protection of the viewer, as they are of the Theotokos and Child.

In the end there is now no way of knowing exactly how images such as these were understood, but this uncertainty is not necessarily what those who paid for and made these objects intended. All three panels were constructed with separate frames, as their unpainted

borders indicate. As on the silver patens (compare 41 and 42) such border areas were frequently used to record in detail the circumstances of an object's donation, and this was probably the case with the icons. Nonetheless, there is a good chance that such inscriptions, even if they had survived, would not have answered the questions a modern viewer might think important about, let us say, the Sinai Christ (55): Who made this work? When? Where? What is its title? While these are the sort of questions created by a mentality that is conditioned by gallery and museum labels, contemporary inscriptions recording who paid for a work, to whom it was presented, and why, reveal what was of importance to the makers and original viewers of this art. Look again at the Sinai Christ – what could be more ridiculous than to think of this work as somehow diminished in significance because we do not happen to know the name of the artist who painted it?