

The Archaeology of Destruction: Christians, Images of Antiquity, and Some Problems of Interpretation*

John Pollini

In the 1990s Christian fundamentalist minister Mel Perry and his ardent followers protested plans to place in the Nashville Parthenon a colossal recreation of Pheidias' famous lost statue of the Athena Parthenos, which once stood in the Parthenon in Athens¹. Carrying Bibles, Perry's group held placards proclaiming that Athena was the "Anti-Christ" and that "Idolatry has come to Nashville in the guise of Art." Most people today would probably just be amused by this sort of protest, since the goddess Athena is regarded in a largely Judeo-Christian society not as a religious figure but as a character out of Greek mythology. More importantly, contemporary monotheistic religions were not being threatened or attacked. However, in late antiquity, Christian fanatics would not have been carrying placards: Instead, like the notorious 5th century Christian abbot Shenoute and his gang of black-robed monks, they would have been carrying pickaxes and firebrands as they terrorized their polytheistic neighbors and destroyed their sacred images and shrines. Shenoute and his zealous followers not only destroyed images of the gods in Upper Egypt, but also killed polytheistic priests². Shenoute is reported to have said that "there is no crime for those who have Christ," a belief shared and acted upon by fundamentalist Christians from late antiquity to the present³.

More analogous in recent years to the destruction of images of classical antiquity is the Taliban's assault on pre-Islamic sculpture in Afghanistan in 2001, with the most noted victim being the colossal

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¹ *The Tennessean*, 21 May 1990.

² Frankfurter 1998, especially p. 278; Frankfurter 2000; see also Libanius *Or.* XXX 8-9.

³ Gaddis 2005, p. 1.

Bamiyan Buddha⁴. In addition, the Taliban Ministers of Information and Culture and of Finance led a wrecking crew that destroyed with axes more than 2,750 precious works of art in the Kabul Museum⁵. Since then, there have been attacks on other Buddhist images. In 2007, for example, pro-Taliban militants were only partially successful in trying to blow up another ancient colossal Buddha figure in the Swat Valley of Pakistan⁶. Among the many to protest these acts of iconoclasm were Muslim leaders, who – in condemning the Taliban – insisted that such acts are not in keeping with Islamic tolerance or teachings. In destroying the Buddhas, however, the Taliban had a model to follow – the prophet Muhammed himself. He is said to have destroyed some 360 sacred images that had been set up in and around the Ka‘ba⁷, which was in origin an ancient temple of a number of gods of the polytheistic peoples who traded in Mecca. Allah, too, was worshiped here, but as only one of many gods⁸. As known from the *Hadith*, the sayings and deeds of Muhammed, and the *Kitāb al-Asnām*, the “Book of Idols,” Muhammed was instrumental in the destruction of images sacred to other religions throughout the Arabian peninsula⁹. He in turn could look back to the Old Testament for inspiration, modeling himself on Moses, who is said to have destroyed the “Golden Calf” of Egypt¹⁰.

Biblical myths have been used throughout the centuries to justify such acts of violence and some of the worst crimes against humanity. Such notions as that of a “chosen people” and a “promised land” provided a model and justification for European colonizers to enslave and commit genocide against the inhabitants of the New World. In the minds of many Christian settlers, these native peoples were to be equated with the Canaanites; therefore, men, women, and children could be slaughtered at will, so that Christians could inherit from their god the “New Promised Land.” The centuries-long genocide of the native peoples of the Americas resulted in arguably the worst holocaust in the modern era¹¹. These same biblical myths

⁴ See, e.g., Manhart 2001; Flood 2002.

⁵ Website 1.

⁶ Website 2.

⁷ As recorded in Ibn Ishaq, see Peters 1994, p. 236.

⁸ Peters 1994, pp. 105-132, esp. 107-112.

⁹ Faris 1952, pp. 15, 21-22, 32-33, 34-53; Fregosi 1998, pp. 31-68.

¹⁰ Ex 23

¹¹ Stannard 1992.

served to promote and justify the later colonization and ethnic cleansing of Palestine by Zionists, both before and after the founding of the State of Israel¹². Such actions have led to an unending cycle of violence in the Middle East, promoting in part retaliatory acts of Islamic terrorism against the West. In exploring the reasons for violence, it is important to consider not only how and why victimizers rationalize and justify their actions but also the psychological process by which victims of violence, with their own ideological and political agendas, can themselves become victimizers.

It is of course cliché today to speak of how “religion” (i.e., monotheistic religion) has received a bad name because of the crimes committed by individuals who have used and abused it to promote some perverse agenda. Although certainly true in part, this view seriously underestimates the power and role that intolerant dogma played and continues to play as a catalyst in promoting hate crimes and other violent acts. Though it is generally said that ancient polytheistic religion was tolerant, the notion of “tolerance,” or for that matter “intolerance,” does not enter into polytheism, since polytheistic religions make no dogmatic pronouncements about the validity of other religions. All gods are regarded as valid, even a god hostile to the gods of other people. We know, for example, that Augustus and his wife Livia sent as gifts golden vessels to Yahweh, the god of the Jews¹³. Polytheists themselves, however, were not always tolerant of those who practiced other religions if they felt that their own religion, political system, customs, and family values were being assaulted by adherents of alien religions. In this sense, polytheists, not polytheistic religions, were “re-active.”

One of the fundamental problems with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam lies in the very concept of a universal monotheism, a system of belief that insists – but cannot prove of course – that there is only one God and one Truth equally valid for all peoples. Monotheism, as we know, began with the Pharaoh Akhenaten in the 14th century B.C.E. However, it was short-lived and apparently had no impact on later monotheistic religions. For the Western tradition, an intolerant monotheistic system of belief was reinvented in the late 8th century B.C.E. by Jews under Hezekiah, revived in the late 7th century under

¹² Pappé 2007.

¹³ Philo *Leg. ad Gaium* 157, 319; Ios. Flav. *Bell. Iud.* V 562-63; see also Smallwood 1981, p. 90.

Josiah¹⁴, and eventually passed on to Christianity and to Islam. Among the more condemnable passages in the Old Testament is Yahweh's demand that the Israelites destroy the temples, shrines, and aniconic images of their neighbors, the Canaanites¹⁵. In one case¹⁶, not only was the sacred image of the Canaanite god Baal burned and his temple destroyed, but also the hallowed ground of his sanctuary was turned into a public latrine. This sort of dishonoring of ancient shrines is reminiscent of the fate of the Temple of Aphrodite in Constantinople, which was turned into a "garage" for Christian praetorian prefects' chariots in 386¹⁷. Such an attitude toward the sacred images and places of other peoples was taken up later on by Christian fanatics, some of whom have long been admired and even venerated as saints for their "good deeds" and "saintliness." Yet these very individuals committed despicable and sacrilegious acts of destruction and desecration that a number of Christians still consider to be commendable and even justifiable.

One of the most popular and cherished saints is St. Nicholas, who in modern Christian myth was transformed into a lovable, pot-bellied, jolly spirit of Christmas, goodwill, and giving. The St. Nicholas of late antiquity was in reality a composite of at least two individuals, a shadowy figure said to be bishop of Myra, who lived at the time of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, and Nicholas of Sion, bishop of Pinara, a true historical individual who lived at the time of Justinian in the 6th century¹⁸. Many of the stories about Nicholas of Sion were attributed to Nicholas, bishop of Myra. In reality, the composite St. Nicholas was anything but jolly or lovable; he was in fact an ascetic fanatic, admired for his destruction of the sacred images, objects, and temples of the gods of polytheistic peoples in Lycia in southwestern Asia Minor (modern Turkey). He is represented in several church frescoes attacking or directing others to attack the sacred images of the gods¹⁹. In the case of a little known Medieval painting in a church in Boyana near Sofia, Bulgaria (fig. 1), Nicholas, accompanied by two of his followers, is shown destroying a

¹⁴ Finkelstein – Siberman 2001, pp. 246-250 (Hezekiah); 275-295 (Josiah).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Deut 7, 1-6; 7, 25; 12, 2-3.

¹⁶ 2Kings 10, 26-27

¹⁷ Chuvin 1990, p.79.

¹⁸ Ševčenko 1983, pp. 18-24; Ševčenko – Ševčenko 1984, pp. 11-19.

¹⁹ Ševčenko 1983, pp. 34-35, 42, 44, 46, 49, 91-94, 130-133, 210 (fig. 10, 14), 259 (fig. 22, 9), 271 (fig. 24, 8), 279 (fig. 28, 6), 304 (fig. 34, 16).

semi-nude statue of the goddess of love, Aphrodite. She appears to wear a Phrygian cap, symbolic of Asia Minor²⁰. Nicholas' follower on the left wields an ax, while the one on the right prepares to pull down the statue with a rope tied around the goddess' neck.



Figure 1: Medieval fresco of St. Nicholas and followers destroying an image of Aphrodite, Boyana Church near Sofia, Bulgaria (from Ševčenko 1983, fig. 10, 14)

The West also had its share of religious fanatics. Among them was Saint Benedict, founder of the Benedictine Order and of the famous mid-6th-century Benedictine Monastery at Monte Cassino, Italy, which was destroyed by the Allies in World War II. It is generally not known that Benedict first destroyed on this site a Temple of Apollo and its sacred cult image, when it was discovered that devout polytheists were still worshiping Apollo there²¹.

²⁰ Ševčenko 1983, pp. 34-35, 210 (fig. 10, 14).

²¹ Greg. Magn. *Dial.* II 8-9.

Of the three major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – it was Christianity that proved to be the most destructive to the polytheistic religions and material culture of not only the Old World but also the New World. However, especially among Christians, Christianity is generally viewed today as a positive force – one that is even responsible for the preservation of the classical past. And while it is true that a number of artifacts, buildings, customs, rituals, and myths were taken over and preserved in some form or other, Christianity was directly responsible for the loss of a great deal of the rich literature, art, architecture, and culture of the many polytheistic peoples who inhabited the lands around the Mediterranean. Of course, the degree and forms of destruction varied throughout the former Roman Empire. Even the notion of Christian “appropriation” is problematic, since the question that is generally not raised is whether and in what way appropriation of cultural property is itself a form of destruction and desecration, especially when this question is considered from a polytheistic point of view.

Christian iconoclasm, or destruction of images, has long been recognized and studied by scholars. Yet when we speak or think about “Christian iconoclasm,” it is generally in terms of Christian destruction of Christian sacred images. Particular attention has been given to the so-called Iconoclastic Debate, a euphemism for the iconomachy, or battle over images, that raged during the 8th and 9th centuries, resulting in a bloodbath that nearly tore apart the Eastern Orthodox Church²². Even the periodic resurgence of Christian iconoclasm from the Middle Ages until the present has been well studied and documented²³. However, relatively little attention, especially in academic literature, has been paid to the Christians’ destruction and desecration of ancient images, behavior that in some circles was and still is considered justifiable because of the belief that what matters in the end is the so-called truth of the Christian message prevailing. Anchored in this belief is the notion of the “triumph” of Christianity, which modern scholarship has repeatedly cast in positive terms.

There is a great body of evidence for Christian attacks on images of classical antiquity. This information is to be found in not

²² See, e.g., Grabar 1957; Gero 1973; Bryer – Herrin 1977; Gero 1978; Stein 1980; Besançon 2000.

²³ See, e.g., Besançon 2000, pp. 147-382; in general Freedberg 1989.

only the written but also the archaeological record²⁴. Interestingly, a great deal of the material evidence that has come down to us has been largely overlooked by archaeologists, who have generally assumed that most of this damage was the result of war, accident, or natural causes. Yet even when this destruction is recognized for what it is, archaeologists and museum professionals have tended to downplay or avoid discussing what is regarded as a sensitive subject, especially in countries with a dominant and dominating Christian culture. For example, in the Archaeological Museum at Delphi, a museum label for two metopes from the so-called Tholos that were studiously effaced by Greek Christians (fig. 2) indicated only that they had been “already damaged in antiquity”.



Figure 2: One of the mutilated metopes from the Tholos at Delphi, Delphi Archaeological Museum (photo author)

²⁴ For the literary evidence see, e.g., Trombley 2001; for the archaeological, see, e.g. Delivorrias 1991; Saurer 2003.

Similarly, after it was recognized that the Temple of Zeus at Nemea was not destroyed by an earthquake, as had long been thought, but by Greek Christians, who hacked away at the bases of the columns surrounding the temple to fell them like trees (fig. 3a)



Figure 3a: Remains of a hacked at column shaft from the Temple of Zeus at Nemea
(photo author)

in an outward radiating pattern (fig. 3b),



Figure 3b: Outward radiating pattern of fallen columns around the Temple of Zeus at Nemea (photo author based on photo didactic in the Archaeological Museum at Nemea)

the didactic in the site museum was changed to read that the Temple “may not have been destroyed by Poseidon, the earth shaker.” In both these Greek examples, acknowledgment of Christian culpability appears to have been intentionally avoided.

Recently, a short film by the noted Greek-born French filmmaker Constantinos Costa-Gavras on damage to the Parthenon over the centuries came under attack by the Greek Orthodox Church, which objected to a short segment showing black-robed Christians mutilating the metopes and pediments of the Parthenon. This film was produced as part of the didactics for the New Acropolis Museum, which was opened to the public on June 21, 2009. As a result of the Church’s displeasure with this element of the film, the Greek Cultural Ministry ordered that the “objectionable” segment be cut. The director of the New Acropolis Museum, who complied with this censorship, released a statement saying that the cuts in the film were “an effort to

eliminate misunderstanding and not censorship at all”²⁵. However, it is a well-established fact that Greek Christians did desecrate the Temple of Athena, as well as a great deal else of Greece’s classical heritage. After the Greek and foreign presses’ criticism of this attempted censorship and an injunction filed against the museum, the director of the museum recanted and agreed to the restoration of the segment on Christian destruction, but only after the filmmaker offered a “self-explanatory clarification.” The director of the museum said, “Mr. Gavras explains that in these scenes [of Christian mutilation] that he did not show or mean to say that the destruction was done by priests but by people of that time”²⁶. However, in the late antique period all temples became the property of the state, and to destroy and/or alter them, the leadership of the Church generally had to petition the emperor. As we know from other cases, it was principally fanatical bishops, priests, and monks who were behind the destruction and desecration of temples in late antiquity²⁷. The organized mutilation of the Parthenon by Greek Christians therefore had to have been set in motion by the Athenian Christian Church at that time.

In addition to censorship to advance a religious agenda, the contemporary Greek Orthodox Church and its supporters have been attempting to squash a growing revival of ancient Greek polytheistic religion, or “Hellenic religion,” in contemporary Greece. These neo-polytheists are accused of being worshipers of idolatry and “poisonous New Age practices.” This sort of intolerant and anti-democratic view was expressed by a Greek Orthodox priest, Eustathios Kollas, who characterized Greek neo-polytheists as “a handful of miserable resuscitators of a degenerate dead religion who wish to return to the monstrous dark delusions of the past”²⁸. Ironically, it was worship of the Greek gods that inspired most of Greece’s glorious monuments. Greek Christians have even resorted to pressure and violence in an attempt to squash this neo-polytheistic movement. Discrimination expressed in a variety of ways against polytheistic Hellenic religion, the original religion of Greece, as well as against other minority religions, is in violation of basic humans rights, according to the 2007

²⁵ Website 3; for the uncensored version, see Website 4.

²⁶ Website 5.

²⁷ Pollini 2007, p. 210.

²⁸ Website 6; Website 7 for the Greek polytheists’ protest against the destruction of the Church and the censoring of the Costa-Gavras film.

report by the U.S. State Department²⁹. Given the lack of separation of Church and State in Greece and the anti-polytheistic stance of the Greek Orthodox Church, which represents 97% of the population, it is worth considering how Greeks can legitimately lay claim to the Elgin Marbles or other antiquities, when so much was destroyed and desecrated by Greek Christians.

It is part of modern popular mythology and sociological propaganda in Greece that barbarians or Turks were largely responsible for the destruction and desecration of ancient Greek monuments and artifacts. Although barbarians on occasion rampaged through towns and villages, they would not have smashed into thousands of pieces sacred stone images of the gods, as in the case of the cult image of the Goddess Nemesis, along with its statue base at Rhamnous (fig. 4a-b)³⁰.



Figure 4a: Line drawing of cult statue of the goddess Nemesis with base from Rhamnous (from Ehrhardt 1997, fig. 1)

²⁹ Website 7.

³⁰ Despinis 1970; Ehrhardt 1997.



Figure 4b: Remains of smashed base of cult statue of Nemesis from Rhamnous (photo author)

This sort of studious mutilation reflects, rather, the level of hatred shown by Christians for non-Christian sacred objects and spaces. There are a number of other examples of this sort of intensive, intentional damage, including that suffered by the grand open-air altar of the Augustan Victory Monument at Nikopolis in Greece, which was smashed into thousands of pieces³¹. In all these sites, there is archaeological evidence for Christian occupation.

The destruction of the Parthenon by fire in late antiquity, if not the result of natural causes, has often been blamed on the invading barbarian Herulians in the mid-3rd century C.E. or later on other barbarians, some of whom were Christians. Never considered, however, is the possible role of Athenian Greek Christians, who had the strongest motivation for destroying the Parthenon, especially in the late fourth century, right after the decree of Theodosios I in 380 outlawing polytheistic religion and calling for the destruction of

³¹ Zachos 2003; Zachos 2007.

temples of the gods³². Adding fuel to the fire, so to speak, was the destruction of the famous Serapeum in Alexandria in 391 or 392 along with its cult image at the instigation of Theophilus, the fanatical bishop of Alexandria. This act of violence sent a message throughout the Christian Empire that it was the duty of Christians to destroy sacred polytheistic shrines and images.

It has long been recognized by scholars – though not the general public – that Christians mutilated most of the metopes on the East, North, and West sides of the Parthenon. Despite weathering, we can still make out the hacked off metope figures (for example, North Metope nr. 25. = fig. 5)³³.



Figure 5: Mutilated North Metope nr. 25 of Eros, Aphrodite, and Helen with cult image of Athena (from Brommer 1979, pl. 21)

³² *Cod. Theod.* XVI 1, 2.

³³ Pollini 2007, pp. 212-216; Brommer 1979, pp. 23, 30, pl. 41.

As for the Parthenon frieze, it has been assumed, even by scholars, that most of the damage to this great sculptural work occurred at the time of the Venetian bombardment of the Acropolis in 1687 under the command of Francesco Morosini, who was a Christian and obviously not respectful of classical antiquity. At that time, much of the north and south walls of the Parthenon with its frieze were destroyed. In a number of sections of the frieze are to be found the typical sort of incidental and irregular breaks, chips, and nicks that would have occurred when blocks hit one another during the explosion³⁴. With the use of a ladder, I was able to study details of the frieze at close range and to determine that all the heads of the Olympian gods and their mortal ministrants in the central block on the east side of the Parthenon were intentionally mutilated³⁵. It is possible to make out, for example, traces of diagonal hacking across Hera's face (fig. 6) that would have been made with an adze-like implement by someone bent upon attack.



Figure 6: Detail of the mutilated and weathered face of Hera from the central east block of the Parthenon frieze (photo author)

³⁴ Pollini 2007, pp. 216-217, pl. 29, 1.

³⁵ Pollini 2007, pp. 217-221, pls. 29, 2-32, 1.

This sort of mutilation has generally been overlooked in the past at least in part because weathering tends to obscure bashing and hacking. In any case, the mutilation of heads in the central block undoubtedly occurred when it was removed from the building in order to put in the apse of the Christian church. Similar intentional damage to the heads of figures occurred in one of six sections of the north and south Parthenon frieze that were removed to create clerestory windows for the church. Of these six sections, only North Block 10 has come down to us in its entirety (fig. 7)³⁶.



Figure 7: Detail of the heads of the “Elders” on North Block 10 of the Parthenon frieze (photo author)

This block shows the same systematic bashing of heads of the so-called elders in the procession that we find in the central block from the east side of the temple. Here, too, there is little to no damage to the areas around the heads. If this mutilation was not directly

³⁶ Pollini 2007, pp. 219-220.

ordered by the Athenian Christian Church, the workers might have taken it upon themselves to do it, since superstitious Christians feared the gaze of such images and demonic possession by them³⁷.

Many small sacred votive reliefs that were set up in various temples and shrines throughout the Mediterranean show a pattern of damage that signals intentionality, though this has generally been overlooked. Such reliefs usually featured gods or divinized heroes and also quite often worshipers, represented on a smaller scale (e.g., fig. 8)³⁸.



Figure 8: Votive relief of Asklepios and worshipers, Athens National Archaeological Museum (photo author)

In a great number of cases, the figures are set within a surrounding frame that would have protected them to some degree in the event that the relief fell or was purposely knocked down. Making clear that many of these figures were defaced by a blunt instrument, rock, or a pick is the evidence of systematic attack, especially on heads or faces, as can be seen in a relief from Omega House in the Athenian Agora (fig. 9a-b)³⁹.

³⁷ For Christian attitudes in general about demonic possession of images of the gods and other sacred objects, see, e.g., Cameron – Herrin 1984.

³⁸ Delivorrias 1991, p. 118, pl. 58b; Kaltsas 2002, pp. 140-141, fig. 268 (inv. nr. 1338).

³⁹ Camp 1989, pp. 53-54; Riccardi 1998, p. 266.



Figure 9a: Omega House relief, Agora Museum, Athens (photo author)



Figure 9b: Detail of Omega House relief, Agora Museum, Athens (photo author)

I have also discovered, especially in Greece and Turkey, a great many funerary *stelai* that reveal a pattern of destruction similar

to what is found on votive reliefs. In an Augustan/Julio-Claudian flat-top naiskos relief in the British School in Athens that had been reused in the second century C.E., the heads have been mutilated, as well as the joined right hands and the left hand of the man, who holds a walking stick (fig. 10)⁴⁰.



Figure 10: Grave stele with mutilated heads and hands, British School at Athens (photo author)

Attacks on gravestones were acts of sacrilege because grave sites were considered sacred places by polytheists⁴¹.

Overlooked, too, has been evidence of attacks on the many small busts that decorated the special sacred crowns worn by prominent citizens associated with the imperial cult. Usually

⁴⁰ Lambert 2000, pp. 495-497, pl. 77.

⁴¹ Routledge 2007.

represented on these bust-crowns are important divinities of a particular city, emperors, and various members of imperial families. In a number of studies of these bust-crowns, the principal interest has been in identifying which divinities and members of the imperial house are represented in the busts, as well as who wore these crowns⁴². Although the damage to the small heads has been noted by archaeologists, the question that has not been raised is why these heads were broken off or bashed, with little to no damage to the bust forms or the crowns themselves⁴³. For example, in the case of a portrait statue of L. Antonius Claudius Dometeinos Diogenes from Aphrodisias⁴⁴, all of the eleven heads of the small busts ringing the turban-like crown were systematically mutilated, a clear indication that this damage was intentional (fig. 11)⁴⁵.



Figure 11: Head of L. Antonius Claudius Dometeinos Diogenes from Aphrodisias, Aphrodisias Archaeological Museum (photo author)

Highly relevant with regard to attacks on bust-crowns is the Christian martyr story of St. Thecla, preserved in the 2nd century *Acts*

⁴² Rumscheid 2000; Pollini 2008, pp. 169-171 with nrs. 15, 21.

⁴³ Pollini 2008.

⁴⁴ Brody 2007, 26 (nr. 15), pl. 11.

⁴⁵ Pollini 2008, p. 171, fig. 1a-d.

of *St. Paul and Thecla*⁴⁶. According to the story, Thecla, who was supposedly a follower of St. Paul, attacked Alexander, a prominent citizen of Psidian Antioch and representative of the imperial cult, as he was taking part in a public religious procession. Rushing up to Alexander, Thecla tore at his official robes and dashed to the ground his golden priestly crown, which bore an image of Caesar. For this sacrilegious and criminal act, Thecla was sentenced to death in accordance with the law. The goal of such stories was to promote Christianity by demonstrating the martyrs' virtues, beliefs, and willingness to die for their faith⁴⁷. However, like many such myths, Thecla's tale was a fabrication: The noted late 2nd-early 3rd century Christian apologist Tertullian tells us in his *de Baptismo*⁴⁸ that it was created by a 2nd century presbyter of Asia Minor who confessed that he had invented the story of Thecla out of his love for St. Paul⁴⁹. The fictitious nature of the tale is further borne out by the fact that Thecla is not mentioned in any of the writings attributed to Paul. That the story was recognized as false by knowledgeable Christians did not prevent it from becoming a reality for many other Christians, who even acquired parts of what they believed to be the invented saint's body to worship as relics. For example, in the Medieval Cathedral of Santa Thecla and Santa Maria in Tarragona, Spain, the arm of some unknown person serves as a relic of the fictional saint. Once a year the arm is taken outside the Church and paraded around the city, whose patron saint is Thecla. A sculptural scene in the Cathedral shows the appearance of her arm to a bishop and his flock when a rock miraculously opened up to give up the arm⁵⁰. Although a Christian myth, the tale of St. Thecla is nevertheless valuable not only in providing us with specific evidence for Christian attacks on sacred bust-crowns and the individuals who wore them but also in confirming hateful and contemptuous Christian attitudes toward the shrines, images, and religious beliefs of other peoples.

In the Roman Empire, Christianity was a very aggressive missionary religion that eventually targeted even Roman citizens. Christians, most notably the leadership, verbally attacked the gods of

⁴⁶ For the *Acts*, see Bremmer 1996; for Thecla in Christian myth, see Johnson 2006; Pollini 2008, pp. 181-182.

⁴⁷ See also Hopkins 1999, pp. 109-121; Stark 1996, p. 164.

⁴⁸ Tert. *De bapt.* 17.

⁴⁹ Hilhorst 1996, pp. 150-163.

⁵⁰ Vicens 1970, p. 46, fig. 156.

others and created civic disturbances and violence, especially when proselytizing in Jewish communities throughout the Empire, preaching what many Jews considered a perversion and heresy. Under the Roman Empire people were generally free to believe in any religion, but to use dogmatic religious beliefs to promote civic turmoil and violence was against Roman law and the *pax deorum* (literally the “peace of the gods”), fundamental for the preservation of the Roman State. The Jews, for example, enjoyed religious freedom and a privileged status under Rome, as long as they did not use their religion to commit crimes or acts of terrorism or to foment rebellion. Provocative and criminal behavior by Christians over time was among the principal reasons why they were punished by the Roman State and why eventually Christianity came to be designated an “illicit religion,” or more accurately, a *superstitio illicita*. It was regarded in this way by the Romans because it went beyond the bounds of proper religious behavior not only in actively professing hatred of the gods and of the religious beliefs of other peoples but also in promoting zealotry and fanaticism among its adherents⁵¹.

The eventual success of Christianity in spreading throughout the Empire in the late antique period was not based on the validity of its message, as many Christians believe, but rather on its being backed and promoted by imperial power: Under Constantine in the 4th century and his Christian successors, Christianity became the religion of the state. No longer a vulnerable minority, Christians were able for the first time to force their will and narrow view of the world on others. Accordingly, self-proclaimed “orthodox” Christians began persecuting not only non-orthodox Christians and Jews but also polytheists, many of whom were unwilling to convert to Christianity. When reason, economic sanctions, discrimination, and threats of violence did not convince people to change their ways or to convert, imprisonment, torture, and executions – including crucifixion – were often employed. As Ramsey MacMullen has shown in his book, *Changes in the Roman Empire*, the change from a Roman to a Christian Empire was not a change for the better; in fact, in many ways it was a change for the worse, especially when it came to religious persecution and the law⁵². For example, in the case of judicial punishments, the number of crimes that carried the death

⁵¹ Wilken 1984, pp. 48-67.

⁵² MacMullen 1990, part. pp. 142-155, 204-217.

penalty, as well as the savagery of the punishments, continued to increase dramatically under Christianity. During the height of the Roman Empire – that is, before the year 200 – there were 15 crimes punishable by death; by the time of the Christian Emperor Constantine's death in 337, the number of these capital crimes had quadrupled to more than 60. To executions by crucifixion and being burned alive, Constantine added the novelty of having molten lead poured down the throats of those convicted of rather minor crimes related to sex⁵³. Christian emperors who followed Constantine were likewise known for their judicial savagery⁵⁴. Mutilation of body parts, including hands, feet, and genitals – unknown as a judicial punishment in the earlier Roman Empire – became a distinctive hallmark of Christian emperors.

Because of negative Christian attitudes toward nudity, sex, and fertility, nude figures set up by the polytheistic peoples of the Empire were objects of Christian assaults. Telltale pick marks can be seen in and around the area of male genitals in a number of images (fig. 12a-b)⁵⁵.

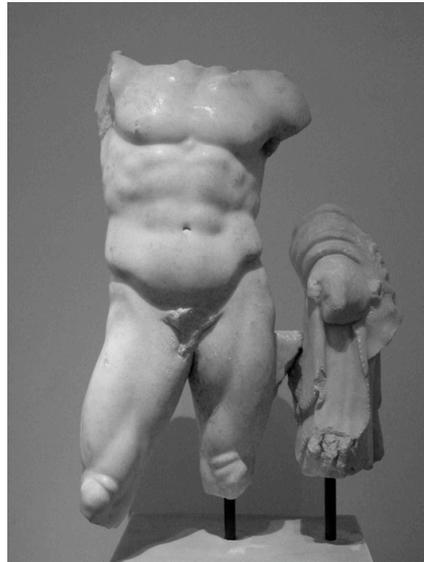


Figure 12a: Statue of a nude male statue, Palatine Antiquarium, Rome (photo author)

⁵³ *Cod. Theod.* IX 24, 1; see also MacMullen 1990, p. 148.

⁵⁴ MacMullen 1990, pp. 204-217.

⁵⁵ Tomei 1997, p. 151 (cat. nr. 131).



Figure 12b: Detail of mutilated genitals of nude male statue, Palatine Antiquarium, Rome (photo author)

Images of female divinities, especially nude ones, were also assaulted. We find both genitals and breasts intentionally mutilated, as in a statue of Aphrodite from the Baths of Faustina in Miletos (fig. 13)⁵⁶.



Figure 13: Statue of Aphrodite from the “Faustina Baths” at Miletos with mutilated breasts and pubic area (photo author)

⁵⁶ Gerkan – Krischen 1928, pp. 122-123, pl. XXXVI, right.

In the case of a statue of Aphrodite from Aphrodisias, which appears to copy the lost cult image in the Temple of Aphrodite⁵⁷, the goddess' breasts, head, and all of the heads of the many figures on the front part of her *ependytes*, a religious garment, were intentionally damaged (fig. 14)⁵⁸ and the figure broken up and used as a fill in a Middle Byzantine foundation wall.



Figure 14: Mutilated statue of Aphrodite from Aphrodisias, Aphrodisias Archaeological Museum (from Erim 1967, p. 285)

⁵⁷ Brody 2007, pp. 8-11 (nr. 1), pls. 1-4.

⁵⁸ Erim 1967, pp. 285, 292; Erim 1986, pp. 58-59.

I would suggest that Christian mutilation of the hands, feet, and genitals of images was directly inspired by actual contemporary Christian judicial punishments. In constructing myths about supposed martyrs, Christians most likely projected back onto the earlier Romans gruesome punishments that Christians themselves imposed.

Although dating intentional Christian damage is often very difficult, most appears to have taken place between the 4th and 6th centuries, when polytheism, which continued to thrive in some form or other within that period, was regarded by the Church as a major problem that had to be totally eradicated. In dealing with the subject of Christian destruction and desecration of images of classical antiquity, we are confronted with a number of issues. For example, although there is a good body of literary and epigraphic evidence for it, we often do not have specific written documents to go with particular monuments or artifacts that have come down to us. In some cases, it is difficult to distinguish between destruction by Christians or by others, especially in the case of lands that were later conquered by Muslims, who had their own tradition of iconoclasm. The Muslims, however, appear to have been responsible for far less deliberate damage than the Christians, since by the time that the Muslims arrived Christians had already destroyed a great deal. There were also few polytheists left to be impressed by how powerless their gods were in protecting their own images from destruction.

In any investigation of Christian desecration, it is important to distinguish between intentional attacks and accidental or natural damage of images and monuments. In short, there is a need for study of various forms of destruction, an “Archaeology of Destruction” – as it were – as an area of scholarly inquiry, in which the material evidence is examined and problematized, especially in light of any literary and epigraphic records. The process of Christian destruction and forced Christianization did not take place systematically throughout the former Roman Empire: It depended on time, place, and circumstances. There is a need, too, for localized or regional studies, as conditions and motivations of individuals and groups could vary considerably. These aspects of Christian destruction and desecration would, I believe, be fruitful avenues of exploration for scholars, as well as for graduate students looking for dissertation topics.

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