

Christian Conversion: The Spiritual Transformation of Eastern Pagan Structures in Late Antiquity

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The Roman Empire was transfigured on every level through its conversion to Christianity and movement away from traditional pagan¹ religion. This transformation necessarily included deciding how to treat the structures that formerly served as pagan temples and symbols of pagan dominance. While the common practice was either to destroy or to use these pagan buildings in a secular setting, a select few were chosen for conversion. Three structures in particular accurately exemplify the significance of these conversions: the Hall of the Muses at Ephesus (Fig. 1), converted in the fourth century; the Rotunda of Galerius in Thessaloniki (Fig. 2), converted in the fourth century; and the Parthenon in Athens (Fig. 3), converted in the sixth century. While all three buildings had to be altered in similar ways, they were salvaged and converted for different but equally meaningful reasons. In this paper, I will explore these three structures through the historical context of each respective city, the attitude of religion upheld by its citizens, and the physical changes made to each structure. This will demonstrate the significance of structural conversion in the Eastern Roman Empire and establish it as an act of extreme importance to the individual people and culture of each city.

These structures originally served three different functions and were converted to new use: the Hall of the Muses at Ephesus was originally a large marketplace that functioned as the financial

center of the city for more than a century before it burned down; the Rotunda of Galerius was originally intended to act as a Mausoleum for the Emperor, Galerius, who served as a *caesar* emperor to Diocletian from 305 to 311 CE; and the Parthenon was originally a large temple for the people of Athens, which was very present in the lives of all of the individual citizens who took part in sacrifices and festivals for Athena at the Acropolis. Compared to the practices of forced abandonment, destruction, or secular use of pagan-built structures, conversion was much less common; therefore, it is important to investigate the psychological attitude of the Christians of the Eastern Roman Empire in order to discover why conversion, and the conversion of these structures in particular, was such a significant act.

Nearing the conclusion of the third century CE, the Roman Empire underwent a change that would permanently mark the end of an era. The emperor Diocletian, fearing that the Roman Empire had grown too large and become too vulnerable to be run by just one man, created the Tetrarchy of the Roman government. This Tetrarchy divided the Roman Empire between the East and West, never to be united again. Along with this important political change came important religious change. Christianity, while persecuted for much of the second, third, and part of the fourth centuries, continued to gain momentum as it made its way throughout the Empire and to the East.

In the Eastern Roman Empire, the full wrath of the Great Persecution against Christians in the early fourth century was in motion. Political conversion to Christianity was more turbulent in the East than in the West; therefore, structures that were converted seemingly possessed a more noteworthy religious, political, and/or social value. The Hall of the Muses, the Rotunda of Galerius, and the Parthenon were selected by the Christian community to be converted because they were particularly significant symbols of authority and prosperity within their own specific cities and were embedded in the visual and social environments of the citizens.

¹ While today the word 'pagan' can be used to describe many things, for the sake of fluidity in this paper, I have used the word 'pagan' to describe the Greco-Roman polytheistic religion.

The state of the Christian community in the Late Roman Empire is characterized by the Great Persecution, which lasted from 303 to 311 CE. Within 100 years, Christians went from being imprisoned, tortured, fined, and killed for their religion to conquering the entirety of the Roman Empire as the dominant and only legal religion. Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305 CE, issued several edicts throughout the Empire against the Christians. While these edicts were not strictly enforced in the West, the Eastern emperors Diocletian and Galerius enforced them with a fury. Under the provisions of the edicts, churches were destroyed, scriptures were burnt, individual Christians lost their freedom and political influence, church leaders were imprisoned, clergy, along with the entire populace, were physically forced to make sacrifice, and all who refused these edicts were imprisoned or killed.² In the wake of these difficult times for the Christian community, an increase in power led to an increase in uncertainty as to how to treat the people, laws, and structures that were intended to serve a pagan empire.³

By the third century CE, the pagan religions, and specifically, the cult of the Emperor, became more of a political tradition than an actual religious belief, described as “a vehicle for a genuine emotion of loyalty to the Empire.”⁴ As real religious devotion to the gods and emperors began to dwindle, four particular Roman emperors were extremely important to Christianity’s rise to power: Constantine, Julian, Theodosius, and Justinian. Constantine, who ruled from 306 to 337 CE, was the first Roman emperor to legal-

ize the practice of Christianity. Although he was not converted until on his deathbed, Constantine played an important role in the development of Christian Doctrine, hierarchy of clergy, and the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea from which the central creed of the Christian religion is derived. After Constantine, there was a brief pagan revival by the emperor Julian who ruled from 361 to 363 CE. His failed attempts to restore the former glory of the Greco-Roman pagan religion only further revealed that while society was not yet willing to accept Christianity fully, pagan religion was no longer the dominant belief system; furthermore, he attempted to revive the imperial cult claiming himself to be a god, though his influence was insignificant and his rule, short.⁵ Julian’s rule was important to the Christian community as an indicator of the weakness of pagan faith and practice throughout the Empire.

After the short-lived pagan revival of Julian, two Roman emperors, in particular, helped to solidify Christianity as the official and only legal religion of the Roman Empire: Theodosius, who ruled from 379 to 395 CE, and Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565 CE. In 380 CE, Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and published the Theodosian Code,⁶ which formally outlawed pagan religion. This code is particularly important in the discussion of conversion of structures because it officially states that all pagan temples, art, and writing must be destroyed.⁷ The Theodosian Code makes clear that those pagan structures that were preserved must have had some sort of special significance not

2 Paul Keresztes, “From the Great Persecution to the Peace of Galerius.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 37.4 (1983): 384

3 This concept of transformation can be compared to Joan Branham’s discussion of ‘sacred space’ in her article “Mapping Sacrifice on Bodies and Spaces in Late-Antique Judaism and Early Christianity.” In this article, Branham discusses in depth the concept of sacred space and its development within the landscape of religious communities. She states, “...mapping is relational; the mapping of one entity by means of another redefines and reformulates spaces as well as the participants acting within them.” (Joan R. Branham, “Mapping Sacrifice on Bodies and Spaces in Late-Antique Judaism and Early Christianity.” *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012. 205). This concept is particularly important in discussing conversion of architecture because it emphasizes the importance of the people acting, living, and practicing religion within a structure.

4 Arnold H. Jones, “Paganism and Christianity, The Great Persecution.” *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press in Association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1978. 305

5 Bart D. Ehrman, and Andrew S. Jacobs. “Christianity in the Imperial House.” *Christianity in Late Antiquity: 300–450 CE*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 50

6 The Theodosian Code was compiled as a complete record of the law in the Roman Empire, not solely concerning the laws surrounding Christianity. (John Matthews, “The Making of the Text.” *The Theodosian Code*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993. 23)

7 Ehrman, 58

only to have been saved but also converted into Christian churches. While Theodosius focused on declaring Christianity the official religion of the Empire, Justinian concerned himself with making the Empire a prosperous Christian one. He poured money into Christian building projects and funded churches throughout the East and West, attempting to “restore Rome’s venerable glory and give it additional luster as well, as a fully Christian state mirroring the splendors of heaven.”⁸ Both Theodosius and Justinian played a key role, as well, in the treatment of pagan structures.

Politically, the emperors were fundamental to Christianity’s function and power in the Empire; the clergy controlled Christianity on a local level. One particular church historian, Eusebius, captured the essence of Christian attitudes toward structural conversion in his “Panegyric at Tyre” of 315 CE. Tyre, in present-day Lebanon, was an important city in the Eastern Roman Empire. Eusebius’s panegyric was given at the consecration of a church that formerly served as a pagan temple.⁹ Spiritually, the conversion process relied on three main components, “neutralization, purification, and exorcism of demons.”¹⁰ While structural changes were also made in order to accommodate Christian ceremony and congregation, the important part was the cleansing and removal of the evil spirits that Christians attributed to pagan gods. According to Eusebius, God gave permission to convert a structure: “God himself, who comprehends the universe, has granted the distinguished privilege of rebuilding and renewing it to Christ... and to his holy and divine spouse.”¹¹ Eusebius refers to pagan gods as “delusions of their ancestors,”¹² and emphasizes the divine influence in the decision to

convert a temple. In reference to God, Eusebius states:

...he did not overlook this place, which had been covered with filth and rubbish, by the artifices of our enemies; but could not think of giving way to the wickedness of those who were the authors of it, though he was at liberty to go to another place, there being innumerable others in the city; and thus to find a diminution of his labor, and to be relieved from trouble.¹³

Eusebius implies that it requires more work to consecrate a structure that was a temple than to build an entirely new church that requires no special purification. It was not until the 16th century that the consecration of a new church building required anything other than the practice of the Eucharist;¹⁴ however, this was not the case for buildings that existed previously as pagan structures. This analysis is extremely important in recognizing that motivation for converting a building could not have been strictly structural, since the real difficulty of conversion lies in the spiritual process.

The Hall of the Muses, the Rotunda of Galerius, and the Parthenon were all important pagan structures that were converted into Christian churches, whereas a much more common practice of dealing with pagan structures was destruction. Particularly if a temple was located at a desired or convenient location, it was commonly torn down in order to make room for a new and pure Christian church to be built. One notable example of this tendency towards destruction is evident in the establishment of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Fig. 4).¹⁵ In 325 CE, Constantine

8 Michael Maas, “Roman Questions, Byzantine Answers: Contours of the Age of Justinian.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 5

9 Christine Smith, “Christian Rhetoric in Eusebius’ Panegyric at Tyre.” *Vigilae Christianae* 43.3 (1989): 228

10 Johannes Hann, Stephen Emmel, and Ulrich Gotter. “From Temple to Church: Analysing a Late Antique Phenomenon of Transformation.” *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008. 16

11 Eusebius of Caesarea, “The Panegyric at Tyre.” *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, Pamphilus, Bishop of Caesarea*. Eds. Christian Frederic Crusé and Isaac Boyle. New York: Dayton & Saxton, 1842. 407

12 Eusebius, 410

13 Eusebius, 413

14 Béatrice Caseau, “Sacred Landscapes.” *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 41



Figure 1: Recreation Model of Converted Hall of the Muses, Ephesus, 4th Century CE



Figure 2: The Rotunda of Galerius, Thessaloniki, 3rd Century CE
Photo Credit: Arthur Urbano, PhD



Figure 3: The Parthenon, Athens, 438 BCE

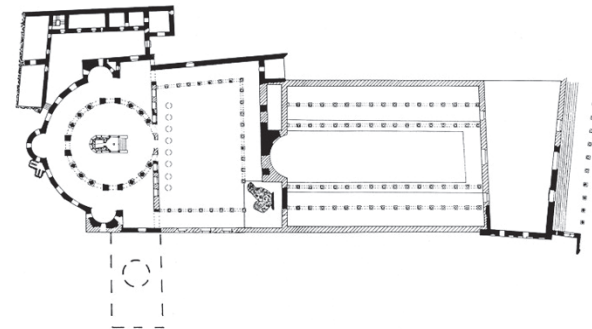


Figure 4: Plan of 4th Century Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, 4th Century CE

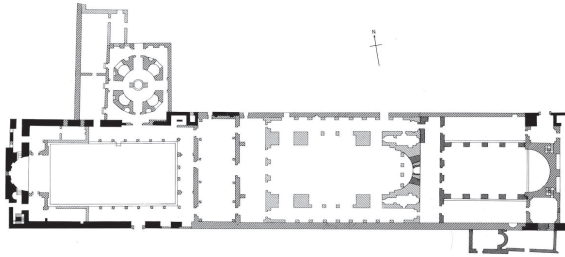


Figure 5: Plan of the 4th Century Hall of the Muses, Ephesus, 4th Century CE



Figure 6: Altar Remains, Hall of the Muses, Ephesus, 4th Century CE
Photo Credit: Arthur Urbano, PhD

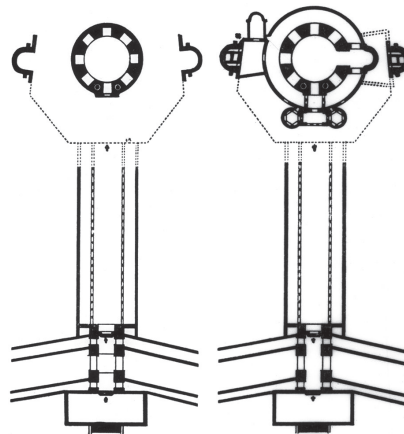


Figure 7: Plan of the Rotunda of Galerius, Thessaloniki, Left - 3rd Century CE, Right - Converted 4th Century CE

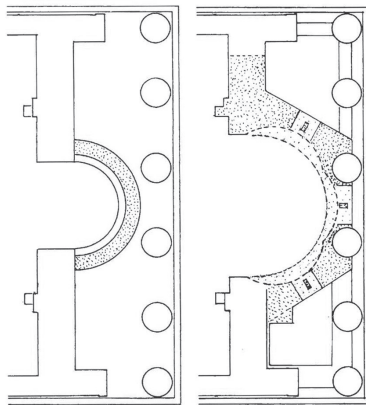


Figure 8: Plan of Construction of Parthenon Altar, Athens, 6th Century CE

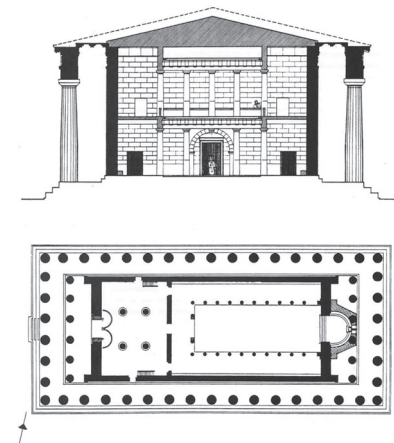


Figure 9: Plan of Converted Parthenon, Athens, 6th Century CE

held the Nicaean Council in order to further the development of church canon and doctrine. The myth surrounding the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre states that Constantine's mother, Helena, a devout Christian, went on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. While there, she found a piece of the True Cross, the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Historically, however, it is documented that Macarius, a Bishop of Jerusalem, attended the Council of Nicaea and informed Constantine that based on tradition, he knew the site of the tomb of the Lord to be under a temple of Aphrodite within the city.¹⁶ Constantine, after hearing the case, agreed to allocate funds to excavate the site and build a new church on it.

Even before the Theodosian Code mandated destruction of temples, Constantine "ordered that it [the Temple of Aphrodite] be demolished; the stone and wooden materials were removed, and the soil was excavated to great depth."¹⁷ While it is tempting to attribute this removal to some sort of spiritual ritual, the soil was removed for logistical purposes.¹⁸ Due to the fact that the tomb was covered, it remained untouched and undamaged throughout the anti-Christian years of the Eastern Roman Empire.¹⁹ Rather than maintaining the Temple of Aphrodite and converting it to a church, excavating around the site, Constantine decided that destruction of the temple was necessary in order to truly preserve the sacred nature of the place.

While the Temple of Aphrodite was not deemed worthy for conversion, the Hall of the Muses was awarded a different fate. The Hall of the Muses at Ephesus predates both the Rotunda of Galerius and the Parthenon in conversion. Ephesus, in present-day Turkey, was an important city in the Eastern Roman Empire due

to its geographical location. This city connected two major roads of the ancient Roman Empire, the Persian Royal Road and the *koine hodos*.²⁰ These roads connected the port cities of the Aegean to interior cities in Asia Minor and further east to important cities such as Alexandria in Egypt. The Hall of the Muses served as a marketplace for the people of Ephesus, but more importantly, it was located at the entrance to the city along these main roads. This marketplace would have served as a prominent attraction, bringing business and wealth into the city of Ephesus. Its location, plan, and size made it an appropriate candidate for conversion. While it once stood as a symbol of the city's prosperity and wealth, through its conversion, it proclaimed the important role of Christianity to the city and replaced the pagan identity of Ephesus.

The early Christian community often feared pagan gods as demons. While on the whole they were superstitious about pagan idols and spirits, the Christians in Ephesus became particularly concerned about the dangers of the pagan world. Even before the Theodosian Code, pagan idols and religion had virtually disappeared from the city.²¹ Particularly, images of Artemis, the former patron goddess of the city, were "destroyed or buried on the main street, her name and image were defaced..."²² Due to the fact that this harsh treatment of pagan images took place before it was legally mandated, it may be deduced that it was for fear of demons: "Belief that they were haunted by demons was common and usually caused crosses or inscriptions to be carved on them."²³ In a city as superstitious as Ephesus, a structure would need powerful significance in order to be preserved and converted. In this case, the prominent location of the Hall of the Muses, its massive size, and its prior

15 The Church of the Holy Sepulchre as it existed in the fourth century was destroyed by a fire in the eleventh century. (Charles Couasnon, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974. 37)

16 Couasnon, 13

17 Hahn, 114

18 The site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was leveled a century before conversion in order to build a foundation for the expansion of city walls. (Couasnon, 12)

19 Couasnon, 12

20 Clive Foss, *Ephesus After Antiquity: a Late Antique, Byzantine, and Turkish City*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979. 3

21 Foss, 32

22 Ibid

23 Foss, 35

function and life-giving role as a marketplace were compelling factors in its reemergence in a life-giving role as the house of God.

The foundation of the Hall of the Muses at Ephesus was approximately 853 feet by 98 feet. The structure had an apse at each end (Fig. 6), east and west, and was divided into three aisles by colonnades.²⁴ The church suffered two fires, one in the late second century CE prior to its conversion and one in the seventh century CE, destroying much of the physical church structure that was rebuilt. While it is tempting to claim that the Hall of the Muses converted in the fourth century is an entirely different structure because the original building was essentially destroyed in a fire, through its conversion, the Hall of the Muses (with the exception of the addition of a baptistery) maintained its original plan (Fig. 4). This structure was for all intents and purposes repaired rather than rebuilt. The floor plan was perfect for accommodating a large congregation, and the size was large enough to make a statement about the power of Christ in His people there. Rather than using another structure that was still intact out of convenience, the Christians of the fourth century in Ephesus, who had been persecuted and martyred in the third century,²⁵ recognized the Hall of the Muses as an important symbol of prosperity and life and chose to convert it.²⁶

Unlike the Hall of the Muses that had to be almost entirely rebuilt, the Rotunda of Galerius in Thessaloniki required few structural changes (Fig. 2). Thessaloniki was a vital city to the Eastern Roman Empire. It is located on the Balkan Peninsula at the mouth of a large gulf,²⁷ and served as the capital of Macedonia.²⁸ This meant that in order to reach the Eastern Roman Empire by sea, Thessaloniki was one of the main port cities used. Additional-

ly, Thessaloniki was the site of the palace complex of the emperor Galerius, on which the Rotunda of Galerius was built. It can be assumed that the figure of Galerius was the ironic driving force behind the conversion of this structure for two reasons: first, Galerius was the main catalyst behind the Great Persecution of Diocletian, and second, the structure is unfit for a true Christian congregation or church ceremony.

While Diocletian maintained his role as the *augustus* (head emperor) of the Eastern Roman Empire during the time of the persecution, according to early church historians it was, in fact, the *caesar* (junior emperor), Galerius, who called for the genocide of Christians in Thessaloniki. Diocletian, who issued the edict of persecution himself, had many ties to Christians, as many of his political advisors were Christian.²⁹ Additionally, the Early Christian historians, Lacantius and Eusebius, on whose writing much of what we know about the early church is based, continually emphasize that Galerius was the true mover of the persecution.³⁰ Therefore, converting a large structure that was originally intended to be a mausoleum and permanent symbol of an emperor who was unspeakably cruel to the Christians is clearly a complex idea. Returning to the only primary record of a conversion ceremony available, the “Panegyric at Tyre,” Eusebius states: “Thinking that the church which had been most assailed by the enemy, she that had first labored in trials, and that had sustained the same persecutions with us and before us—this church, like a mother bereft of her children, should also enjoy with us the mercies and privileges of the all-gracious giver.”³¹ Here, Eusebius likens the suffering of the church from its adornment with pagan images to the literal persecution of the body of the church, its

24 Foss, 52

25 There are several records of martyrdoms occurring in Ephesus under Decius and Diocletian. (Foss, 36)

26 There are only two other structures recorded as converted at Ephesus. The Temple at Serapis and a large Roman monument were reused as churches. These structures were also in the heart of the city and were staples in the Ephesian cityscape. (Foss, 36)

27 William A McDonald, “Archaeology and S. Paul’s Journey in Greek Lands.” *The Biblical Archaeologist*. Vol. 3, No. 2 (1940): 22. The American Schools of Oriental Research

28 Laura Nasrallah, *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonike: Studies in Religion and Archaeology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 467

29 Keresztes, 380

30 Ibid

31 Eusebius, 413

people. While the Christians of Thessaloniki conquered pagan rule, they symbolically conquered their persecutor through the conversion of the Rotunda of Galerius.

This notion is further emphasized by the fact that physically, the structure does not fit the paradigm of how an early Christian church should look. While the structure never actually served its function as a mausoleum³² due to the dramatic political changes in the Empire, construction of the building began in the late third century CE.³³ With a simple circular plan, the building was topped by a dome with a height of about 98 feet, which had nine lunette windows at its base.³⁴ Through its conversion, the structure underwent several physical changes. The dome was rebuilt, walls were stripped and redecorated, an apse was added to the east, and the niches along the interior of the rotunda were deepened in order to create an ambulatory (Fig. 7).³⁵

While the decoration on the dome today is extensively damaged, certain iconographic patterns can be discerned. First, it is important to note that the church was dedicated to Saint George, a martyr of the Christian church who had allegedly served as a Roman general. Coupled with this dedication to a martyr, the decoration of the dome suggests an iconographical plan of the triumph of Christianity. The dome is separated into three circular registers,

which were originally decorated with 36 million tesserae.³⁶ Today, the inner and middle registers are largely damaged and nearly impossible to discern, but small sketches on the clay beneath where the tesserae would have been laid reveal the figure of Christ in the center, seemingly Christ at the *parousia*.³⁷ This Christ becomes important in understanding the outer ring of the mosaic, which is the best preserved.

The lowest register was originally 18 panels, although only seven remain, containing either two or three robed men in each panel standing in front of an elaborate two-storied architectural setting; moreover, these figures are labeled with a name, an occupation, and a month.³⁸ While not all of these figures can be identified, many of the names and occupations correspond to documented martyrs from the time of Galerius' rule.³⁹ The dedication of the church to Saint George and the panels of martyrs seem to be a direct commentary on Galerius for whom this structure was created and by whom it was originally commissioned. The Christ in the center suggests dominance and justice, as Christ is the true judge of all, who will come to separate right from wrong. This comparison between the judgment of Christ and the damnation of Galerius are political and religious statements and account for the decision to transform a structure that was seemingly unfit for a large Christian parish: it was

32 While some scholars such as Laura Nasrallah (Nasrallah, 480) maintain that this structure originally served as a temple to Jupiter based on the plan of the Pantheon, there are several reasons why I have chosen to present this structure as originally intended to be a mausoleum for Galerius. First of all, the Rotunda of Galerius did not have a temple façade like that of the Pantheon, while another rotunda on the palace complex site did. Additionally, the use of a centrally planned rotunda was much more common in the construction of mausoleums than temples that were generally basilica-like. Finally, the political and religious implications highlighted by the existing dome mosaics present a plan of triumph over persecution, with their emphasis on martyrs and the *parousia*, drawing from imagery of the book of Revelations that makes clear statements about the Christian attitude toward the Roman Empire.

33 Nasrallah, 474

34 Nasrallah, 472

35 Nasrallah, 482

36 Nasrallah, 484

37 In her book *From Rome to Early Christian Thessalonike; Studies in Religion and Archaeology*, Laura Nasrallah reveals what remains are found of the inner register of the dome mosaic. "A silver field, fragment of a gold nimbus, and a cross, which Christ carried in his left hand, a raised right hand—and the mosaicists' preparatory sketch on the bricks," (Nasrallah, 486). These elements combine to present a Christ that according to traditional iconography is a symbol of Christ's triumphant return in his second coming, or the *parousia*.

38 Nasrallah, 486

39 Ibid

polemically compelling.

While the conversion of the Parthenon took place two centuries after those of the Hall of the Muses and the Rotunda of Galerius, it underwent similar spiritual and structural changes. The Parthenon (Fig. 3) in Athens was completed in 438 BCE and was constructed as a temple to the patron goddess of the city, Athena Parthenos. Like many other parts of the Eastern Roman Empire, including Ephesus and Thessaloniki, Athens was resistant to a change in religion; however, Athens held onto this resistance more powerfully and longer than other cities. The Panathenaic Festival, which served as a symbol of the prosperity and importance of the pagan religion and devotion to Athena, was still celebrated until the early fifth century CE.⁴⁰ While Athenians tried desperately to cling to their pagan roots, Christianity had been celebrated in Athens since 53 CE when Saint Paul arrived to preach to the people of the city.⁴¹ It was not until the cancellation of the Panathenaic Festival that Christianity began to take its place as a religious and political power.

This conversion of the Parthenon was not without limits. For the Hall of the Muses at Ephesus, the Virgin Mary was likened to and replaced Artemis in the conversion of the city. Similarly, the people of Athens went to great lengths to preserve their pagan gods in the likeness of Christian saints.⁴² The sixth century brought this attitude of mutual acceptance to a screeching halt when law mandated the destruction of temples and the last philosophical bastion of learning, the Neoplatonic School, was closed under Justinian in 529 CE.⁴³ The Parthenon presented the early Christians of Athens with a dilemma. It stood as the symbol of Athenian prominence, pride, and devotion for nearly 1000 years and the Christian community recognized it as an important structure. Despite the fact that new cathedrals and Christian churches were being built with gov-

ernment money on a large scale throughout the city, the Parthenon stood in the way of creating a truly Christian landscape. Therefore, conversion of the Parthenon into a church seemed the only plausible way to promote Christianity and maintain an important part of Athenian history.

While the Parthenon has been largely restored today, it has undergone periods of ruin and restoration up until our own time. Thus, it is nearly impossible to see the physical evidence of what it looked like as a church. There is speculation regarding when destruction and reconstruction actually took place over time due to the site's turbulent history; it is unlikely, however, that the building had been restored to its original character at the time of conversion. While the Parthenon was no longer an active temple following the rule of Constantine, the Panathenaic Festival continued annually through the pagan revival of Julian. After a period of disuse, several large renovations were made to the Parthenon in order to make it appropriate for a Christian congregation. The conversion of the Parthenon is significant not only because of its history as the symbol of the city of Athens, but also because converting it required major structural changes. Justinian funded several building projects of new churches, and specifically, Athens had several large and new cathedrals at the time when the Parthenon was converted. This puts to rest the idea that the transformation of the Parthenon was nothing more than an excuse to take advantage of a pre-built structure.

The foundation and orientation of the Parthenon remained the same throughout the conversion of the site. An apse was placed at the east in order to house an altar (Fig. 8), and a baptistery was added in the northwest corner of the narthex.⁴⁴ Walls were set between the columns of the outer peristyle, and doors were added between the narthex and the naos.⁴⁵ Working around the columns, everything was changed to give the illusion of a floor plan similar

40 Alison Frantz, "From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19 (1965): 193

41 Jenifer Niels, *The Parthenon: From Antiquity to Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 294

42 Frantz, 188

43 Niels, 297

44 Niels, 304

45 Ibid

to that of a Christian basilica (Fig. 9). The reason for all of these changes was that Christian and pagan religious practices were extremely different. In a pagan religious ceremony, gatherings and sacrifice took place outside the temple. The interior did not need to accommodate a large congregation or movement of a congregation throughout the mass. Therefore, a clear space for worship had to be distinguished in a way that was not required of a pagan temple and those changes were implemented by the opening up of more doors and the addition of walls.

Additionally, the Parthenon was richly decorated with “overtly pagan themes [that] seem to have caused some uneasiness among the Christian viewers.”⁴⁶ This required the removal and defacement of several parts of the sculptural plan including the metopes of the north and west façades, and the metope, pediment, and cornice of the east façade.⁴⁷ Spiritual transformation was not easy, either: “The process of transformation consisted of . . . three stages: deconsecrating by means of the removal of the cult statue and other pagan trappings; possibly an intermediate period when the building was used as a place of worship without any structural alteration; and finally, architectural remodeling.”⁴⁸ The building could not simply become a church by placing a cross on the front. While the architecture had to accommodate a Christian congregation, the spiritual atmosphere had to be altered as well.

There were many political, social, and religious components in converting pagan structures of the late antique Eastern Roman Empire into churches. Rather than attributing these conversions to convenience and economic advantage, it is important to examine the few individual structures that were converted and ask the question, why. The Hall of the Muses at Ephesus, the Rotunda of Galerius, and the Parthenon were all built and converted at different times in different places. They were all intended to serve different purposes and varied greatly in structure and size. Due to the rarity of Christian conversion, it is hard to attribute conversion to one specific

component that makes a structure worthy; therefore, the only true explanation is that a structure had to carry enormous, multivalent significance to the people of its community.

While the reasons for converting a structure varied greatly, their conversions were equally significant. The Hall of the Muses at Ephesus was not converted strictly for its structural purposes. This is evident in the fact that although it maintained the same plan, it had to be rebuilt entirely from the ground up. The Hall of the Muses was significant for what it stood for to the city of Ephesus. It was a symbol of prosperity, trade, and a source of existence for the people of a city that served mainly as a rest stop between the West and the rest of Asia Minor. The Rotunda of Galerius was meant to serve as a mausoleum to an emperor who persecuted the Christian community. By the time of his death, it became clear that Christianity had become powerful enough that his dream of eliminating it completely as a religion was impossible. While his mausoleum was not practical or large enough to be used for a congregation, the building itself had a special meaning through its conversion. It stood as a symbol for the religious and now political triumph of Christianity and a celebration of the death of their persecutor, Galerius. It was not converted for its structural amenities, but for its spiritual value. The Parthenon is the symbol of the Golden Age of Greece. To the Roman Empire, it remained a symbol of prominence of the city of Athens and a sign of loyalty to the gods and goddesses that the Romans and Greeks shared. In Athens, pagans and Christians existed side by side for much longer than other cities. When pagan practice was finally outlawed, and Athens was redefined as a Christian city, it was reasonable that its great architectural symbol needed to be converted along with it. While the Parthenon had fallen into disrepair, the Christian community resurrected it as a symbol of their prominence, bonding the cityscape of Athens to Christianity in a new way. While many structural changes were made, the integrity of the building remained intact and is apparent even today in its

46 Niels, 306

47 Ibid

48 Frantz, 201

restoration.

Each of these buildings was an extremely important symbol to the city in which it was built. The Temple of Aphrodite in Jerusalem, despite its important relic, was just another temple and, therefore, was destroyed and built over in the form of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Hall of the Muses, the Rotunda of Galerius, and the Parthenon were each a defining monument in the urban landscape of their respective cities and therefore could not be given up. Moreover, the conversion of pagan structures into churches was not simply a reassignment of spatial usage; it was a deeply significant act. More than an attempt to rewrite the inheritance of the Eastern Roman Empire, it was an attempt to inspire the people to acknowledge and embrace their history of struggle and triumph while maintaining their new identity as citizens of a Christian Empire.

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