

# BYZANTINE ATHENS AND THE PARTHENON

## ‘A FORGOTTEN HISTORY’

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Much is known and has been written about **Athens**, though virtually all of it has to do with the ancient city-state and the modern national capital. What about the period in between, which is almost 2000 years long and, indeed, makes up the majority of Athens' history? Not only has it not received much attention, some historians have denied

that **Athens** had a history in the **Byzantine period**, both because no records survive from then and also because we know (*or think we know*) that the city was a provincial backwater of no importance. Well, it turns out that both of these statements are not true.

There actually exists considerable evidence for the history of Athens in Byzantium and also for its continued fame, importance, and prosperity. But this evidence has not before now been gathered together, evaluated, and translated. I have done so in a book that will be published next year by Cambridge U. Press under the title *The Christian Parthenon: Pilgrimage and Classicism in Byzantine Athens*.

What I discovered, in the course of my background reading of Byzantine sources, were many references to travelers -- including monks, saints, emperors, bishops, and tourists -- who went to Athens specifically to visit the **Parthenon**. Now, we have always known that sometime in late antiquity, let us say in 500 AD, the **Parthenon** was converted into a church in honor of the Mother of

God, the **Theotokos, the Virgin (Parthenos)** of Christian worship. Not only, then, was there a continuity of religious function in the temple (2 honored Virgins, both deemed the protectors of Athens: *πολιουχοι*), but the building was changed into a church with minimal architectural alteration. Even the pediments with the statues of the **gods and goddesses of Olympus** were left more or less intact!

At first, I was struck that the Byzantines, who were **Orthodox Christians**, would travel from afar to pray in this ambiguous **holy** place. As I continued to find more and more references to such travelers, I began to put other pieces of the puzzle together and realize that something extraordinary had happened in Byzantine Athens. For example, it is not very well known, although it should be, that there are over 200 Byzantine inscriptions carved on the **Parthenon's** columns and walls (*and we must assume that many more were there and have been lost*). The same is true about the other ancient temples that were likewise converted into churches (*e.g., the Erechtheion, Athena Nike, the temple of Hephaistos, known today as the Theseion, and others*).

In fact, the entire urban center of ancient Athens had made the transition to **Christianity** without much change and, apparently, with little of the violence and dislocation that occurred in other parts of the empire. These inscriptions, along with the other literary evidence that I found, proved that Athens continued to attract visitors who wanted to associate their names and prayers with the monuments that are still in the eyes of the world today. We have many Byzantine poems and orations in which the **Parthenon** is praised with the utmost devotion. A miracle of **divine light** was believed to emanate from the building and illuminate all of Attica and the world beyond. All this refutes the claim made by many historians that the Byzantines had no interest in the antiquities of Greece.

It is possible to take this argument one step further: the **Parthenon** was one of the most important site of **Christian pilgrimage** in the Byzantine world (*after Constantinople, Thessalonica, and Ephesus*). Athens was



largely identified with this temple/church and people came from all over to see it. Moreover, the **Parthenon** was far more important in this way in Byzantium than it ever had been in classical antiquity itself.

We may then entirely rewrite the history of the monument: instead of classical glory followed by medieval neglect and modern revival, we may postulate an alternative history. The **Parthenon** was only one among many great monuments of ancient **Athens**, and it was only in **Byzantium** that it acquired the special importance that it retains to this day. The modern theme of the temple's "**light**" is in fact a descendant of the Byzantine miracle and has no reflections in antiquity itself. The **Parthenon** is in many ways a **Byzantine monument**.



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