

# Model and Copy in Byzantium

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Few aspects of social behavior tell us more about a culture than those practices that involve the roles it assigns to models and copies. Under interpretation, such conduct reveals its attitudes toward authority and antiquity, its sense of identity and regard for security, and the relative importance that it attached to imitation and invention. To varying degrees, all societies display these concerns, but in none were they so firmly grounded in a considered theory of the relation between prototype and derivative as they were in Byzantium. An example from the domain of law will illustrate, though not explain, this cultural difference. As against the Roman tradition in which the use of copies as evidence in court was prohibited, at least from the tenth century on Byzantine tribunals accepted the legitimacy of certified copies of documents.<sup>1</sup> The very word used for an official copy—*ison*, meaning equal—suggests the conceptual distinction between it and the terms *copie*, *Kopie*, *kopiya*, and so on, in modern languages, all derived from the Latin word for abundance.

Beyond the realm of law, the term *antigraphon* (transcript) was normally used to denote the duplicates needed in many transactions. But it is the theological term *paragôgon* (derivative) that best illuminates the sort of thinking that allowed and even encouraged belief in the validity of copies. As part of his efforts to define Orthodox doctrine, about the year 750 St. John Damascus begins his argument, tellingly, with a direct quotation from the fourth-century church father, Basil of Caesarea: "Honour [paid] to the image is conveyed to its prototype."<sup>2</sup> The citation is immediately followed up with a definition of this last term: "The prototype is the subject represented from which the derivative is made."<sup>3</sup> These and similar ideas, seized upon by art historians seeking to

account for the endurance of types across the history of Byzantine art, are applicable only by extension to painting. And this extension is itself made by the eighth-century father in an overt defense of the legitimacy of icon veneration when he compared the process of painting, in which the artist “by virtue of imitation” transfers human forms to pictures, to God’s creation of man in his own image.<sup>4</sup> Again, part of this passage is taken from another Cappadocian father (Gregory of Nyssa), but for our purposes its significance lies in the ready application of an article of faith to the task of legitimizing the cult of objects made by human hands. And, once again prolonging the chain of quotation, in the early ninth century Theodore of Stoudios recycles the phrase “by virtue of imitation” to clarify and qualify the way in which an image resembles its exemplar: “The model is in the image except for the difference in substance ... By virtue of imitation, the image and the model are one.”<sup>5</sup>

We can thus recognize a complex texture of copying in Byzantine intellectual practice. The basic layer is a fabric of citation into which, and exploiting which, is inwoven an ethical theory of representation designed to justify the production and veneration of sensible images. Against the charge that the painter’s craft was futile and deceptive— not so much illusionistic as illusory<sup>6</sup>— the defenders of icons argued that pictures were symbolic aids to worship and contemplation.<sup>7</sup> True, if images served not descriptive but contemplative purposes, as the Pseudo-Dionysius had maintained, there was little or no need for realism in their execution; with some slight justice one could attribute to this attitude the frequent lack of attention to mimesis in Byzantine icon painting. But such concerns were outweighed by the understanding that, as the Patriarch Nicephorus put it, they are “figured symbols of heavenly powers.”<sup>8</sup> Their utility consisted precisely in this transparency to a higher realm, a utility that could only be infinitely expanded by the simulacra that they generated. And if iconophile theory had propounded a non-essential relation between model and copy, that between one image and another *was* essential: in order to “work” an image must emulate its precursor as closely as a human agent could manage. This end attained, its very resemblance would guarantee its effective adher-

ence to saintly prototype. The perpetuation of the chain of likeness depended upon the mimetic skill of those who forged its component links.

On the face of it, this theological (rather than “artistic”) aim would seem to have little to do with the pragmatic objectives of those who commissioned copies of documents. A slab of marble painstakingly inscribed with the contents of a lengthy chryso-bull—a charter bearing an imperial seal—confirming the privileges of the church of Corfu,<sup>9</sup> for instance, was clearly intended to lend enduring form to a document originally written on parchment, and thereby serve to maintain those privileges. But transcending its obvious juridical value, such a monument was ordered with one eye on perpetuity, an extension forward in time much in the way images, as we have seen, looked back to, while observing, ancient uses. In both cases the production of copies, regardless of medium, cost, or aesthetic merit, was held to participate in the power of revered iconic archetypes.<sup>10</sup> The conventional language of the inscription and the conventional forms of an icon declared and reinforced an established order, an unchanging set of norms assuring the spectator that he or she was witness to a reality ordained by heavenly authority or its earthly surrogate.

Furthermore, nowhere in a Byzantine document or *objet d'art* is there to be found explicit or implicit acknowledgment of its novelty. Conscious originality was to be vilified. This is evident from the tale of a painter named Theodoulos the Stylite condemned for allegedly depicting “angels in the form of Christ, with both angels and Christ shown as aged.” Pressing this charge, an abbot of the Stoudios monastery cited the objections of others, presumably members of his community, who in turn invoked the pillars on which the church was built:

They said that you had done something foreign and alien to the tradition of the church ... given that all the years that have passed no examples of this peculiar subject have ever been given by any one of the many holy God-inspired Fathers.<sup>11</sup>

Lest it be supposed that this was simply an argument among monks, a story told by Theophanes the Confessor should be recalled. In the course of his reign (491-518), the emperor Anastasius commissioned pictures in a palace and a church in Constan-

tinople from a Syro-Persian painter. Since these were "alien to the holy iconography of the Church," the chronicler relates, "there occurred, as a consequence, a big popular uprising."<sup>12</sup>

Unlike the self-consciously radical creations of modern cultures (from the New Deal to *Novyj Mir* and the French *NRF*) that proclaimed their novelty, in Byzantine Greek the word *neos*, from which our "new," "nouveau," and "neu" derive, meant imitation not innovation.<sup>13</sup> To rebuild, to recover, to restore what had been were blessed enterprises; to undertake a new *démarche* was to approximate heresy. Behavior that expressed the sanctified aspect of reproduction is particularly evident in architecture. Scattered through the Byzantine east and the Latin west are a host of monuments that in one way or another reflect the circular plan of the Anastasis, the rotunda built about the middle of the fourth century over the tomb of Jesus and said to have been discovered under the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> Whether these "replicas" were built as echoes of, or substitutions for, the prime pilgrimage site in the Holy Land matters less than the fact that the formal mimesis involved was understood as an adequate and fitting embodiment of the idea of the Holy Sepulchre. By this means the temporary setting of the original construction was ignored in acts that made present (in both a chronological and a spatial sense) the most important of Christendom's *loca sancta*. The lack of accord between the paradigm and its exponents—in materials, elevation, or decoration—was of little concern to those who worshipped in these later rotundas, if indeed it was even noticed. These versions, in the language of molecular biology, reproduced the genome rather than the constituent cells of the Sepulchre.

Time is implicitly denied no less by that (to us) most curious of Byzantine institutions, the "second founder" (*anakainistes*). Repeatedly in documents one finds invoked with this epithet persons who created entirely new foundations, yet are described as restoring an ancient monument. Thus Leo the *protospatharios* (an official at the imperial court), who in 873-874 built the church of the Dormition at Skripou, is described in an inscription addressed to the Mother of God and her son around its apse as he "who has reconstructed (*anastêsantos*) your church because of his desire and very great faith."<sup>15</sup> On its face, such sentiments may seem like

those of Romantic *littérateurs* and artists who saw in Goethe a figure that brought antiquity to life again. But there is a signal difference: where the eighteenth century celebrated an individual, in the ninth and later centuries in Byzantium it was his creation, not his personality, that was saluted. Far from being an index to a building's reception such inscriptions—often commissioned by the donor—are, rather, guides to the social expectations of a building. And these, at least at the level of those who paid for and commemorated new foundations, were rhetorically couched in terms of continuity.

We shall return presently to the implications of inscriptions in churches. But for the moment it is the perpetuation of a long-lost antiquity via the culturally sanctioned process of copying that merits consideration. In Byzantine painting and sculpture, Christ was traditionally shown in the classical costume of *chiton* and *himation*; military saints and warriors of the Old Testament, such as Joshua, in the lamellar corslets and "fighting skirts" of Roman generals. Apostles and Evangelists, meanwhile, appear in the guise of ancient philosophers. Once again it is instructive to compare these attributes with those in which eighteenth-century artists garbed their heroes. In the hands of a David, to dress Socrates or the Horatii in this manner was a deliberate piece of historicism, as a comparison with his many images of Napoleon, dressed in contemporary fashion, makes clear. It is true that Byzantine emperors were likewise shown in garments and regalia that we take to be of their own time. But the discourse in which such images are described leaves no doubt that they, too, were treated as incarnations of antiquity: "scion of the Ausonii," for example, was a standard way of referring to a Komnenian ruler.<sup>16</sup> The emperor and empresses, moreover, when they appear in the company of Christ, the Mother of God or the saints are marked by the very contemporaneity of their costume, yet engage these figures from the New Testament and Christian antiquity with no sense of historical disjunction. If the mass of visual evidence is insufficient to prove the point, the fact that no Byzantine, no medieval or Greek author remarks on this discrepancy, or questions the classical attire of the community of saints, shows that these phenomena were normative.

This much, perhaps, is self-evident. But it raises the important question of the source of the models employed by Byzantine artists. Given that they were unaware of ancient Greek costume, even as depicted on artefacts,<sup>17</sup> it seems clear that they were copying not Hellenistic or Roman sources but each other. By dint of their ubiquity, these forms declared and reinforced an established order, an unchanging set of norms that assured the beholder, even in a distant land,<sup>18</sup> that he or she inhabited a divinely ordained *oikoumenê*. This realm, peopled with figures dressed as they imagined the Homer or Lucian on whom they commented to have dressed, was a fictive universe of the Byzantines' own creation, more remote from their own time than we are from the era of Lorenzo de Medici.

So all-persuasive is such imagery that *in toto* it could be said to constitute a foundation myth for Byzantium. As with most such myths, one should look to it for the purposes that it discharged for its disseminators rather than for any concern with archaeological accuracy or the veridical niceties that a later age expects in its vain pursuit of an objective history. One result of the uniform that it bestowed on its holy men and women, and of depicting the emperors of early Byzantium in the garb that they wore in the artist's own time, was to allow and encourage a dense system of visual and ideological cross-reference. One image could furnish multiple allusions and evoke diverse responses. To describe this optical potential we need some equivalent for the literary phenomenon that today is called intertextuality, but, in its absence, its workings are easily conveyed by example. A well-known ivory plaque in Moscow shows Constantine VII crowned by Christ in the manner in which more often Christ himself is shown baptized by John in the Jordan. The emperor becomes a Christ-like figure *ipso facto*.<sup>19</sup> In such contexts a search for ultimate "sources" is less productive than the discovery of analogues, especially those that were widely diffused. Thus, on a gold coin issued in 1042, the empress Zoe and her sister Theodora are represented frontally, holding between them the *labarum*,<sup>20</sup> the early Christian standard borne by Constantine the Great and Helena in countless mosaics, frescoes, and icons. Its import is clear: in an age when male rulers were the norm, women, and especially women of imperial blood, are worthy vehicles of imperial authority

and faithful representatives of the mission to preserve the long-established faith. On the obverse of the coin, bearing a frontal image of the Virgin with the child on her breast, transparency yields to direct appropriation with the legend "Mother of God, come to the aid of the empresses."

Simple invocations of this sort could be manufactured *ad hoc*, but more elaborate compositions, particularly those in archaizing verse (like the one at Skripou) would require the intervention of a poet for hire. It may be such an individual in the capital, far removed from the site where his words would be employed, was responsible for the long inscription that runs around the main cornice of the New Church at Tokalı kilise at Göreme in Cappadocia.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, the inscription could be derived from one in another church, even as frescoes in the New Church were reproduced in the so-called Pigeon House church at Çavusin.<sup>22</sup> All we know for sure is that the Tokalı inscription mentions scenes that are not depicted in the church and ignores others that are present.

Despite these examples, it would be rash to argue generally that the practice of copying, whatever the medium, served to separate Byzantines from the realities around them. First, the replication of an existing artefact involved, at the least, access to and experience of that model. This is surely so in the case of a fourteenth(?)-century sarcophagus, expanded to accommodate an adult but obviously based on one designed for a child in the fourth century, now housed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul.<sup>23</sup> More tenuously, we can speculate on the impact that Byzantine creations may have had on the conduct of daily affairs. If it is true that the picture of Goliath's head carried into Jerusalem on a pike in a Psalter of 1088<sup>24</sup> reflects the end of George Maniakes, the rebel who suffered a similar fate in Constantinople forty years earlier, the power of images to bolster socially approved patterns of behavior can scarcely be doubted.

In the empirical domain of construction and decoration, on the other hand, learning from the past might be a more apt term than copying for the process entailed in later applications of an exemplar. In the Chiote church of H. Georgios Sykousis and the Panagia Krina, built on a plan similar to that of the Nea Monê on the island, the "mistakes" of the eleventh-century building are corrected.

Where in the latter the conch of the eastern arch was set lower than the vaulting of the sanctuary, thus blocking the view of the mosaic of the Virgin to whom the church is dedicated, this solecism was eliminated in its derivatives.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, echoes of the complexity of John II Komnenus' Pantokrator monastery in the capital are to be found nearly two centuries later in the additions to the monasteries of Constantine Lips, the Pammakaristos and the Chora (Kariye Camii). Despite their difference in plan, these last two churches are linked by resemblances in both masonry techniques and decorative details to the point where they may well be expressions of the same workshop.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, beyond such cases, we can still recognize the authority of the *type* in Byzantine building and the power that it wielded to command replicas. The best-known instance is the paradigmatic form of the *katholikon* at the Great Lavra, begun about 962, particularly as it was enlarged with lateral apses perhaps a generation later. The resulting triconch commended itself first to the monks of Vatopedi and Iviron at the time of this addition and, later, to the builders of churches throughout the Balkans.<sup>27</sup> This sort of observance suggests something akin to the cognitive attitude of John of Damascus when he spoke of the Mosaic tabernacle which "contained the image and pattern (*typos*) of heavenly things."<sup>28</sup> And it is perhaps in this light that we should regard the production of "copies" in other forms of Byzantine art.

The primacy of the *type* over the individual variant presents difficulties for modern scholars, trained to discriminate between artefacts that are superficially similar. It is easy to detect the differences of iconographic detail and emphasis in two contemporaneous versions of, say, Christ's Nativity<sup>29</sup> or between three eleventh-century mosaics variously depicting the Anastasis (Resurrection).<sup>30</sup> But surely more revealing than these distinctions about the nature of the culture that gave rise to them is the degree of similarity, the unity of purpose, and to a large extent of content in these images. All versions of the Anastasis announce the message of salvation just as all renderings of the Nativity, despite their differences, declare the human aspect of Christ on which that salvation ultimately depends. The extent to which these representations may be said to be "copies" is therefore less important than that which they



offered to shared experiences, much as Dutch flower pictures of the seventeenth century, replete with insects, bemused a public newly interested in natural science; or as Cubist still lifes, employing newspapers, wine bottles, and other household paraphernalia implied that the new vision of a Braque or a Picasso was available to anyone. Each representative of these groups replicated the experience involved and did it with a common visual vocabulary.

There is more to these cognitive communities than the conclusion that conceptual models bulked larger in the minds of both artists and their audiences than the immediate prototypes that the former exploited and the parallels that the latter witnessed. To the extent that we emphasize the phenomenology of beholding, be it of the vision in the mind's eye of its creator or in that of the person who experiences what has been created, we relieve the Byzantines (and even ourselves) of the burden imposed by the mechanistic relation that we suppose to have existed between the model and copy.

## Notes

1. See N. Oikonomides, s.v. "Copy official" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, New York, 1991, p. 530.
2. *Traité du Saint-Esprit*, XVIII, in *Sources chrétiennes*, vol. 17 bis, ed. B. Pruche, Paris, 1968, p. 406.
3. *De fide Orthodoxa* IV in *Patrologia graeca* 94, col. 1158.
4. *Oratio I*, in *Patrologia graeca* 94, col. 1269.
5. *Epist. ad Platonem*, in *Patrologia graeca*, 99, col. 500. For more on this question, and particularly the model-image relation that connects the members of the Trinity, see G. Ladner, "The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 7 (1953): 8-10.
6. A charge levied at the Iconoclastic Council of 754. See G.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* XII, col. 252.
7. Most succinctly argued by the Patriarch Nicephorus (c. 750-828). See his *Discours contre les iconoclastes*, trans. M.-J. Mondzain-Baudinet, Paris, 1989.
8. The original wording is to be found in his *Antirrhetikos* in *Patrologia graeca* 100, col. 777C.
9. A. Guillou, ed. *Recueil des inscriptions grecques médiévales d'Italie*, Rome, 1996, no. 56. The chrysobull, dated 1218, was drawn for Theodore Comnenus Doukas, ruler of Epirus.
10. G. Vikan, "Ruminations on Edible Icons. Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium," *Studies in the History of Art* 20 (1989): 47-59.

11. For this case and its ideological context, see A. Cutler, "Originality as a Cultural Phenomenon," in *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music*, ed. A. Littlewood, Oxford, 1995, pp. 203-216, esp. 205. The studies in this volume, on which I have drawn in the present paper, contain valuable observations on the topic specified in its title.
12. *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig, 1883, I, pp. 149-150.
13. P. Magdalino, "Observations on the Nea Ekklesia of Basil I," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 37 (1987): 52-53.
14. The classic study of these replications by R. Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 1-33 has not been replaced.
15. N. Oikonomides, "Pour une nouvelle lecture des inscriptions de Skripou en Béotie," *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994): 481.
16. See the body of texts usefully assembled and commented by P. Magdalino and R. Nelson, "The Emperor in Byzantine Art of the Twelfth Century," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982): 123-183.
17. On this matter, a controversial issue, see A. Cutler, "Mistaken Antiquity. Thoughts on Some Recent Commentary on the Rosette Caskets," in *AETOS. Studies in Honour of Cyril Mango*, ed. I. Sevckenko and I. Hutter, Leipzig, 1998, pp. 46-54, with bibliography.
18. Thus compare the famous observation of Sylvester Syropoulos when, attending the Council of Ferrara in 1408, he encountered forms that were alien to him: "When I enter a Latin Church, I do not revere any of the saints that are there because I do not recognize any of them." See V. Laurent, *Les 'Mémoires' du grand ecclésiarque de l'Eglise de Constantinople ... sur le Concile de Florence (1438-1439)*, Paris, 1971.
19. *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843-1261*, exhib. cat., ed. H.C. Evans and W.D. Wixom, no. 140 (I. Kalavrezou). The same strategy is used in images of emperors anointed by the patriarch of Constantinople in the illustrated Skylitzes manuscript in Madrid.
20. *The Glory of Byzantium*, no. 147G (W.E. Metcalf).
21. A.W. Epstein, *Tokali Kilise: Tenth-Century Metropolitan Art in Cappadocia*, Washington, D.C. 1985, p. 33, pp. 35-36, 79-80.
22. L. Rodley, "The Pigeon House Church, Çavusin," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 33 (1983): 301-339.
23. A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines du moyen âge II*, Paris, 1976, no. 145. For this and other derivatives, see A. Cutler, "Art in Byzantine Society: Motive Forces of Byzantine Patronage," (1981), reprinted in his *Image and Ideology in Byzantine Art*, Aldershot and Brookfield, Vermont, 1992, study no. XI, esp. pp. 780-787.
24. A. Cutler, *The Aristocratic Psalters in Byzantium*, Bibliothèque des Cahiers Archéologiques XIII, Paris, 1984, fig. 67.
25. In my turn, I derive this information from the forthcoming study of R. Ousterhout, *Byzantine Masons at Work*.
26. Idem, *The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul*, Washington, DC, 1987, pp. 19-20.
27. P.M. Mylonas, "Le plan initial du catholicon de la Grande-Lavra au Mont-Athos et la genèse du type du catholicon athonite," *Cahiers archéologiques* 32 (1984): 89-112.
28. See note 3 above.

29. I have in mind the difference between mosaics in the Chora in Constantinople and the church of the Holy Apostles in Thesalonike, noted by T. Gouma-Peterson in *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music*, p. 138 and figs. 11.4, 11.5.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-137 and figs. 11.1-11.3.