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The Conversion of the Parthenon into a Church: The Tübingen Theosophy

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Readers of this journal do not have to be reminded of the uncertainty that surrounds the conversion of the Parthenon into a Christian church. Surprisingly to our eyes, this symbolic event appears to have gone entirely unrecorded. The only piece of written evidence that has been adduced concerns the removal of Athena's cult statue, mentioned without a firm date in Marinus' Life of Proclus (written in 485/6, the year following the philosopher's death)¹. It is not clear, however, whether this removal marked the conversion of the building to Christian worship or merely its desecralization. The two, we have been told, need not have been simultaneous and it is not inconceivable that the Parthenon remained closed and unused for a fairly long time.

Scholarly opinion has been gradually veering towards a late date of the conversion, namely the sixth century and, more specifically, the latter part of Justinian's reign². What had been mentioned as a *terminus ante quem* by Deichmann (the presence of tombs on the south side of the temple, one of which contained coins of Justin I, Justinian and Tiberius II)³ has become a *terminus ad quem* without any specific reasons being given other than a general judgment of the religious situation at Athens during that period. The earliest Christian graffito, we may remember, dates from 693⁴.

One small piece of evidence appears, however, to have been overlooked. It is provided by the so-called Tübingen Theosophy, a document that requires a few words of introduction so as to establish its credentials. Besides, it happens to be little known to byzantinists, whereas classicists have shown greater interest in it. As preserved today, the Tübingen Theosophy is partly a résumé, partly a series of extracts (each one introduced by ὅτι) of a longer work in eleven books bearing the title Θεοσοφία. Its anonymous author, according to the Byzantine epitomator, started by writing seven books about "the right faith", then added four more, "showing that the oracles of the pagan gods and the so-called θεολογίαι of the Greek and Egyptian sages, indeed also those of the famous Sibyls, were concordant with the aim of divine scripture and expressed either the primordial cause of all things or the holy Trinity contained in a single god-head". The aforesaid oracles and *theologiai* were contained in books 8-10, whilst book 11 was devoted to

the sayings "of a certain Hystaspes, king of the Persians or the Chaldaeans, a very pious man (as he claims) and for that reason deemed worthy of receiving a revelation of divine mysteries concerning the Saviour's incarnation"⁵. At the end of the work was placed a very brief chronicle (perhaps simply a chronology) from Adam to the emperor Zeno (474-91), in which the author advanced the view that the world would end in the year 6000 from Creation.

The original work was, therefore, composed between 474 and, at the latest, 508, assuming the author was using the Alexandrian computation from 5492 BC. The expectation that the world would end in the reign of Anastasius was, indeed, quite widespread at the time⁶. It has been conjectured that the author was an Alexandrian (because he reproduces four oracles inscribed in various places in Egypt, nos. 45-48) and he was, of course, a Christian, although his religious stance may not have been strictly orthodox. Not only did he cite certain apocrypha⁷, he also believed (and here we are given a direct quotation) that divine gnosis, like an ever-flowing fountain, had been vouchsafed both to pagan Greeks and

1. Ch. 30, ed. J. F. Boissonade in Diogenes Laertius, ed. C. G. Cobet, Paris 1878, p. 166. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, in their excellent ed. of Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, I, Paris 1968, p. xxiii, n. 1, fall into an old error in identifying the statue in question with the one that was erected "autour de 470" (their date) in front of the Senate house at Constantinople. The latter may have been the Athena Promachos, as argued by R. J. H. Jenkins, *JHS* 67 (1947), p. 31-33; it was certainly not the Athena Parthenos, whose later history is summarized by A. Frantz, *AJA* 83 (1979), p. 401, n. 54.

2. So A. Frantz, *From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens*, *DOP* 19 (1965), p. 200 ff.; eadem in *The Athenian Agora*, XXIV. *Late Antiquity: A.D. 267-700*, Princeton 1988, p. 92; J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens*, London 1971, p. 444 f.; and others.

3. *Die Basilica im Parthenon*, *AM* 63/64 (1938/39), p. 136 f.

4. A. K. Orlandos and L. Vranousis, *Τά χαράγματα τοῦ Παρθενῶνος*, Athens 1973, no. 34. The earlier dates suggested for nos 74 and 141 are uncertain and palaeographically implausible.

5. These were not included in the résumé. On Hystaspes see J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, Paris 1938, I, p. 215 ff.; II, p. 359 ff.

6. See, e.g., my comments in *Byzantium, the Empire of New Rome*, London 1980, 203 f.

7. Namely the Testament of the Lord, the Commandments of the Apostles and the Birth and Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The mention of the last by an author of the late fifth century is worthy of note.

to barbarians, whose testimony ought not to be rejected. Such views, expressed with varying degrees of emphasis, had a long history. The patriarch Photius summarizes a work of similar content, which, he says, was written by an honest but misguided man as late as the reign of Heraclius (*Bibliotheca*, cod. 170).

We do not know the identity or date of the epitomator, whose résumé happened to survive in a single manuscript, cod. Argenteratensis gr. IX of the fourteenth century⁸. It contained five opuscles of pseudo-Justin (including the *Ad Diognetum*, of which it was the only known witness), followed (in a different hand) by (6) Verses of the Erythraean Sibyl and (7) Χρησμοὶ τῶν ἐλληνικῶν θεῶν (=the Theosophy), then two works by Athenagoras and other matter. The manuscript, once the property of the humanist J. Reuchlin, ended up in the City Library of Strasbourg, where it was burnt in 1870. Fortunately, two copies of the Theosophy had been made earlier, the first in 1580 by Bernhard Haus for Martin Crusius, professor at Tübingen, the second between 1587 and 1591 by J.J. Beurer, professor at Freiburg. The *apographon Beureri* appears to have been lost⁹, but that of Haus survived at Tübingen (cod. M. b. 27) and was first published in 1889¹⁰. Such has been the tortuous odyssey of the work that concerns us. In spite of so many stages of transmission, the text of the epitome has come down to us in relatively good shape. What needs to be noted here is that the quotations from oracles and ancient authors, whenever they can be checked, appear to be genuine, and one text (no. 13) has even been discovered inscribed on a stone at Oinoanda¹¹. In other words, we are dealing with a scholarly collection, which brings us to the passage that interests us (no. 53):

“Item. In the days of the emperor Leo [457-74] an idol temple of the same age as the city of Cyzicus was about to be transformed by the citizens into a prayer house of our most-glorious Lady the Theotokos. On the side of the temple an oracle was found carved on a big stone. The same was also found at Athens, on the left side of the temple, by the door, completely identical to the former (ὁ δὲ αὐτὸς εὐρέθη καὶ Ἀθήνησιν ἐν τῷ ἀριστερῷ μέρει τοῦ νεῶ κατὰ τὴν πύλιν ἀπαραλλάκτως ὁμοίως ὢν ἐκείνῳ). When the citizens had consulted Apollo in these terms: “Prophecy to us, O prophet, Titan, Phoebus Apollo, whose house should this be (εἶη)?” he prophesied as follows: ‘Do whatever is conducive to virtue and order (κόσμον). For my part, I proclaim (ἔφητεμέω) a single, triune God ruling on high, whose imperishable Logos will be conceived in an innocent [girl]. Like a fiery arrow (τόξον) he will course through the middle of the world, capture everything and offer it as a gift to the Father. This house will be hers. She is named Mary.’”

A similar story, placed in a different context, entered the chronographic tradition not later than the beginning of the sixth century and is found, with some small variants, in Malalas (to be exact in book IV of the Chronicle, thought to have been written at Antioch in *ca* 530)¹² and John of Antioch of about the same date¹³. Here the occasion is the voyage of the Argonauts who, after entering the Propontis, unwittingly kill in battle Cyzicus, “king of the Hellespont”. They then take Cyzicus (the city) and, to atone for their guilt, build a temple there. Not knowing to whom to dedicate it, they consult the oracle of Apollo at Pythia Therma (modern Yalova) in the same terms as in the Tübingen Theosophy and receive the same answer, which they inscribe “in bronze letters on marble”. They place the inscription on the lintel over the door of the temple, “calling it the house of Rhea, Mother of the gods. Many years later this house was made into a church of the holy Mary, Mother of God, by the emperor Zeno”. Comparing the two versions, we may note that that of the chronicles makes better sense. The point of the story is that the oracle had been delivered in ancient times, when the temple of Rhea/Cybele was founded¹⁴, and was discovered when it was about to be converted into a church. Hence the statement (absent in John of Antioch) that it was inscribed in full view on the lintel of the entrance door is inappropriate. The Tübingen Theosophy is better in this respect in specifying that it was found on the side of the temple. For the rest, however, it is in some confusion, implying as it does that the same “citizens” who were about to convert the temple into a church consulted the oracle of Apollo (which is, of course, absurd). Seeing that the text of the Theosophy is a résumé and that the abbreviator was more interested in the text of the oracle than in the circumstances of its discovery, we should not press the point too much. What needs noting, however is, that the Theosophy and the chronicles preserve distinct versions. If the Cyzicus oracle had been added to the Theosophy by some later scholiast, the chances are that he would have followed Malalas or another chronicle source.

It is hardly necessary to demonstrate that the oracle is a crude fabrication. It is not even in verse, but in a kind of rhythmical prose decorated with a few fancy words like ὄρωρε, the neologism ἐφετεμέω and μοῦνον ὑψιμέδο-ντα. It also resembles another fake oracle found in a contemporary text, the *Disputatio de religione* of the fifth or sixth century¹⁵. That, however, in no way invalidates the statement that the archaic temple of Cyzicus was converted into a church of the Virgin Mary in the reign of Leo I or Zeno. It is even quite possible that a fabricated inscription was “discovered” at that juncture, an act that

is not unparalleled in Byzantine history¹⁶. The discovery attracted wide publicity seeing that by *ca* 500 it was reported by authors active in Egypt and Antioch respectively. The same oracle was also copied either in Sardinia or in Rome in the sixth or seventh century into cod. Laudianus gr. 35, the famous bilingual manuscript of Acts, which was in the hands of the Venerable Bede¹⁷. Finally, the passage about the “temple” of Athens (presumably the Parthenon), which implies that it, too, became a church of the Virgin Mary. Unless the contrary is proved, we may assume that the passage in question was contained in the original Theosophy, probably composed in the last quarter of the fifth century. It was certainly in the text by the eighth or ninth century because it is reproduced in a shorter collection of oracles entitled *Συμφωνία* in cod. Vatic. gr. 2200, a famous manuscript thought to be of Oriental origin (Palestine/Syria or Egypt), where the relevant entry starts with the words: Ἐπίγραμμα εὐρεθὲν ἐν λίθῳ κεκολλημένον εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον ναὸν τῶν θεῶν Ἀθηναίων, νυνὶ δὲ τῆς ἁγίας Θεοτόκου, omitting all mention of Cyzicus, which Erbse adds in his edition (*op.cit.*, p. 205). There is some evidence, therefore, that the Parthenon was turned into a church of the Theotokos in the second half of the fifth century, thus adding further weight to the statement of the Life of Proclus.

8. Described by J. K. Th. von Otto, *Iustini philosophi et martyris opera*, II, 3rd ed., Jena 1879, p. xiii ff. and specimen of script at the end of the volume. See also the excellent discussion by H. I. Marrou, *A Diognète*, 2nd ed., Sources chrétiennes 33 bis (Paris 1965), p. 5 ff.
9. So von Otto, *op.cit.*, p. xxiv ff.
10. Klaros. Untersuchungen zum Orakelwesen, Leipzig 1889, p. 95 ff. Critical ed. by H. Erbse, *Fragmente griechischer Theosophien*, Hamburg 1941, p. 167 ff.
11. See L. Robert, CRAI 1971, p. 597-619 and his earlier study, CRAI 1968, p. 568-99. H. D. Saffrey has since identified no. 65 as being derived from Porphyry's Commentary on the Parmenides: *Connaissance et inconnnaissance de Dieu* in J. Duffy and J. Peradotto (edd.), *Gonimos. Neoplatonic and Byzantine Studies Presented to L. G. Westerink* at 75, Buffalo, NY 1988, p. 1-20.
12. Bonn ed., p. 77-78.
13. Fr. 15 (from Paris. gr. 1630) in C. Müller, *Fragmenta hist. graec.* IV, p. 548. Also in Cedrenus, Bonn ed., I, p. 209-10.
14. For the temple see F. W. HaslucK, *Cyzicus*, Cambridge 1910, p. 22 ff., who thinks it was on Mt Didymon outside the city.
15. Ed. E. Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch am Hof der Sasaniden*, TU XIX (1899), p. 9: ἑωσφόρος τις οὐρανοπεμπῆς γῆς πεδίσματι, παρείς ἔνδον ὕλεων οἰκεῖ, νηδυῖ κόρης δέμας ἑαυτῶ ἀναπλάττων· οὐνομα δὲ αὐτῆς δις ἑβδομήκοντα ἕξ· ὅς τας κοιρανίας καὶ πᾶν ἱερὸν ὑμῶν σέβας καθελὼν ἐπὶ τὴν ἄκραν τῆς πανόλου σοφίης μετάξει παντὸς κλέους τὸ γέρας. On this text see the remarks of V. Déroche, *TM* 11 (1991), p. 277 f.
16. Cf. my article *A Forged Inscription of the Year 781 in Byzantium and its Image*, London 1984, Study X.
17. See my remarks in *La culture grecque et l'Occident au VIIIe siècle*, *Settimane di studio... sull'alto medioevo*, XX, Spoleto 1973, p. 689 f.; reprinted in *Byzantium and its Image*, Study VI.