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Recapturing the Past in Late Antiquity¹

Glen W. Bowersock

When Edward Gibbon published the first volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776, his title revealed unequivocally what he thought about the history of the West in the centuries that followed the golden age of Rome (at least as he saw it): He knew well that he was taking up the theme of Montesquieu in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. Once decadence had set in under the Roman Empire, it was all downhill in a dizzying spiral of decline, corruption, and the follies of mankind. Not even the rise of Christianity in this period afforded Gibbon any optimism. He shocked his contemporaries by his cynical view of the early Church and its claims to extraterrestrial beatitude. Yet, as Gibbon toiled on, he found that the story kept unfolding, that the Roman Empire never really seemed to decline and fall. It just went on and on. By the time he laid down his pen he had brought himself all the way to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Gibbon ended his work by giving the lie to his own title. History constantly surprises us by falsifying those traditional and comfortable assumptions that so often and so dangerously inform the decisions we make in the present. In the last three decades no part of western history has been subjected to such radical revision as the postclassical period that saw the triumphs of Christianity and Islam. This is late antiquity. What Gibbon and others had seen as a time of decline and decay has been reconceptualized as an era of innovation, creativity, and heightened spirituality. Although,

¹ This English text represents the substance of lectures delivered at the Louvre in Paris on 9 October 2000 (*L'actualisation du passé dans l'Antiquité Tardive*), at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts on 19 October 2000 (in English), and at La Sapienza in Rome on 29 May 2001 (*L'attualizzazione del passato nella Tarda Antichità*). On all three occasions some of the images adduced here were presented by slides. I am grateful to Professor Mario Mazza for his invitation to contribute this paper to the journal *Mediterraneo Antico* and for his willingness to publish what is essentially the spoken version with light annotation.

as we shall see, this new perspective has recently come under attack, I want to reaffirm the special character of the age and to argue that its vigor depended significantly upon a dramatic reappropriation of the legacy of its past. We all have to live with the burden of the past. The dust of memorabilia left from earlier generations is often depressing or embarrassing or, at best, a sign of how much progress we have made. Antique objects, including ruins, can be reminders of ancient glory or ancient folly. They can be cherished simply because they come from another epoch. But in late antiquity the past was clearly no burden, and antiques were not cultivated because they reminded the viewer of an ancient time. The past was itself alive. It was a catalyst for change, to be recaptured, reshaped, and rethought.

On Cyprus in a luxurious villa near the town of New Paphos at the southwest of the island the owner decorated the floor of one of his rooms with a mosaic representing the infancy of one of antiquity's most popular and enduring deities, Dionysus². The god is shown in the lap of Hermes in a representation that dramatically evokes the traditional image of the Virgin and Child. The child is surrounded by the nymphs who care for him, including Nysa whose memory remained fresh in the name of cities in both Asia Minor and Palestine. Personifications of nourishment (*anatrophê*) and divine birth (*theogonia*) stand alongside figures symbolizing ambrosia and nectar, the food of the gods. The same room at New Paphos offers other evocations of classical antiquity—Dionysus in his chariot, Apollo at the flailing of his musical competitor, Marsyas, Leda whom Zeus loved when he assumed the guise of a swan, Cassiopeia in a beauty contest in which she is surprisingly the winner. These images, drawn from an ancient tradition of paganism are nonetheless very much of their time. The unmistakable imprint of Mary as the Mother of God (*theotokos*) and an usual local variant of the beauty contest leave no doubt of the contemporaneity of the mosaics. We are looking at work from the Christian empire of late antiquity.

Two centuries later an undoubtedly committed Christian from an Egyptian city called Aphroditopolis, the city of Aphrodite, passed some leisure hours in writing poetry in the language and meter of Homer. In sonorous Greek that reflected diction of more than a thousand years

² See W. Daszewski, *Dionysos der Erlöser*, Mainz 1985, with G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge and Ann Arbor 1990, 49-50 [Italian translation, *L'ellenismo nel mondo tardoantico*, Roma-Bari 1992, 80-81].

earlier he summoned up the glories and the achievements of the pagan gods. In praise of a certain Duke Callinicus he wrote, «I call you all-brave Heracles, who has taken the trouble to bring the universal help of freedom to all... You have surpassed Achilles and Diomedes, and you have outstripped Ares..., [and] Dionysus with his wreathed revelers [praises] your blessed reputation»³. Once again the antique past is transformed into a vehicle of expression for a later age. The precise nature of this integration of the past into the present is frustratingly elusive, but one thing is undeniable. The past has been recaptured and renewed in this utterly altered world.

When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and transformed the former Roman Empire into a Christian state, it long remained obvious that the gods and cults of paganism did not simply disappear. The new government made efforts over the following decades to close down the old temples, but their religion and its mythology were far too deeply rooted to be plucked out and discarded. The polytheist past and its antiquities, both physical and conceptual, were absorbed into the new order and became arguably the most fundamental part of it. The Christians were obsessed, as saints' lives and theological treatises make amply clear, with the continued presence of paganism, and the pagans themselves, who have often been seen as conservative traditionalists, were not averse to borrowing images and myths from the Christians among whom they lived. There was genuine cross-fertilization. The Christian empire was a place in which the past was redeployed with new meaning and new fervor. The antique was not something distant or alien. It stood on the front lines of social and religious confrontation.

Professor Cyril Mango of Oxford expressed a similar opinion in a lecture he delivered at the Louvre eight years ago on the role of antique objects in the world of late antiquity⁴. He rightly observed, «The inhabitants of the proto-byzantine empire continued to live in ancient cities surrounded by works of art that were antiques from our point of view but not at all from theirs. Everywhere—in the streets, the squares, the public baths, meeting rooms, private houses—there were statues, reliefs, images, mosaic pavements representing mythological and pagan subjects».

³ L. MacCoug, *Dioscorus of Aphrodito: His Work and His World*, Berkeley 1988, 91-93.

⁴ C. Mango, *L'attitude byzantine à l'égard des antiquités gréco-romaines, Byzance et les images*, Paris 1994, 95-120, particularly 112.

But the celebration of a militant and victorious church in the voluminous writings of the Fathers and the hagiographers has persistently tended to suggest to historians since the Renaissance that the Constantinian revolution marked some kind of rupture with the past. Christianity replaced polytheism, it seemed, and everything was changed. Late antiquity appeared as the last feeble flickering of classical radiance, and the stage was set for the twofold domination of Christianity and Islam. This view, given its most eloquent formulation in Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century *Decline and Fall*, has gradually been undermined by a historical sociology that rejects the notion of rupture in favor of the gradual transformation of an inherited and still vital past. From such a perspective late antiquity—the centuries from Constantine to Muhammad, and even beyond—appears as a creative and productive period in which classical antiquity is re-appropriated and dramatically promoted.

The integration of past and present in late antiquity has now become a topic of lively controversy. A vision of continuity is contrasted with one of rupture and historical periodization. The recent work that Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar, and I have published with the aid of several hundred scholars under the title of *Late Antiquity — A Guide to the Postclassical World*, presupposed the idea of a living past in a historical continuum, whereas the idea of a break is most ardently espoused today in Italy, in the wake of Santo Mazzarino's work *La fine del mondo antico*, through the book by Aldo Schiavone, *La storia spezzata*, and Andrea Giardina's recent discussion of what he calls *l'esplosione di tardoantico*⁵. Yet I think it safe to say that all of us would all agree that a stark opposition between rupture and no rupture would not be a reasonable historical postulate. No epoch looks like another one, nor can an epoch itself be defined by only one set of parameters. Indeed no decade looks like another decade, nor is it immediately obvious why a decade or a century constitutes a historical unit at all (as opposed to other intervals of time). What one sees is a constantly flowing stream of time and events, and the stream inevitably carries with it much of what came before. Heraclitus famously declared that you can never step into the same river twice, but in another perfectly comprehensible sense

⁵ A. Giardina, *Esplosione di Tardoantico*, StudStor 40, 1999, 157-180, with the discussion *Gli «spazi» del tardoantico* held at Capri on 11 October 2000 [publication pending].

you can certainly step into the same river. The water may be different but it is indissolubly bound up with the other water.

Julian, the apostate emperor in the middle of the fourth century of our era, found this a hard lesson to learn. He had been raised as a Christian, but like many Christians he had been educated in the great classical texts of antiquity, and these were all pagan. As a result he found himself irresistibly drawn to the still flourishing community of polytheists. So when he became emperor, he tried to undo the work of Constantine by restoring the pagan gods as the divinities of the state. But what is frequently not noticed is that in doing this he imported a disposition that had itself been shaped by his Christian mentors. He was as intolerant of those he called «atheists» (the Christians) as he had once been taught to be of the pagans. He devised a program to help the sick and the poor that conspicuously mirrored the charitable endeavors of the Church. A pagan could no more escape Christianity than a Christian could escape paganism.

The contemporaneity of the old gods and the old classics could sometimes foster outbreaks of violence, as in the destruction of temples or the burning of books. These outbreaks attest the vigor of past, not its irrelevance. Iconoclasm, the pulling down of statues, and the burning of books was nothing new in any case. It had a long history in the classical world and scarcely heralded a cultural twilight. Vandalism and terrorism everywhere are the work of people who take their opponents seriously. It is wrong to see the acts of militant monks or murderous catechumens as the onward march of the Christian faith. The word «desacralization» is sometimes invoked to describe the occasional onslaught on temples⁶. Yet there is nothing sacred about this work. The issue is not exorcism but destruction, not desacralization but plain desecration. As Cyril Mango and Claude Lepelley have repeatedly pointed out, the statues of pagan gods that were displaced by such violent acts were not forgotten and were even sometimes put in honorable locations when the hot tempers had cooled. It was often enough the Christians themselves who did this, not because they harbored a secret sympathy for pagans but simply because these objects were part of their cultural heritage. It was all very confused, yet altogether human.

⁶ See now, B. Caseau, *La désacralisation des espaces et des objets religieux païens durant l'Antiquité Tardive*, in M. Kaplan, *Le sacré et son inscription dans l'espace à Byzance et en Occident*, Byzantina Sorbonensia 18, Paris 2001, 61-123.

Let us consider, as an example of this cohabitation of past and present (and therefore of pagan and Christian), the career of a fifth-century patriarch of Antioch, Severus, who was the subject of a memorable biography by his fellow-student Zacharias Scholasticus⁷. In that work the power and contemporaneity of the classical past dominate the narrative and call up life as it was lived in Egypt, Phoenicia, and Asia Minor. Despite the evident tendentiousness of hagiography such as the *Life of Severus*, the author's scrupulous attention to detail reveals a world far less altered than Christian dogma would proclaim. Although born into an eminent Christian family in Pisidia, in the interior of Anatolia, Severus's mother sent him to Alexandria to be educated after the death of his father. There he studied grammar and rhetoric, and he soon fell under the spell of the works of the greatest pagan orator of the fourth century, Libanius.

Severus was part of a student community that included Paralios, another man from Asia Minor but one with several believing pagans in his family. Paralios, we are told, had himself had contact with demons and with magic, and he had attended a distinguished Alexandrian school of pagan teachers with a particular interest in Egyptian antiquities. One of them, Horapollon, was a specialist in hieroglyphs and composed a Greek treatise that is still extant on the interpretation of that ancient writing. His very name was *programmatic*, composed of the names of the Egyptian deity Horus and the Greek Apollo. When Paralios abandoned his pagan sympathies and began to mock the whole school of Horapollon, the pagan students launched a riot. We should remember that student riots were, like iconoclasm, nothing new in the ancient world and had long been a feature of competing schools. In this case religion played a role, and the scene that follows shows pagans wreaking just as much terror as the Christians themselves. So canny Christian friends of Paralios responded by taking advantage of the inside knowledge he had acquired during his dalliance with polytheism.

He led them to a place where idols were kept. As the hagiographer describes it, «We came to a house that was totally covered with pagan inscriptions (*i.e.* hieroglyphs). In one corner a double wall had been built. Behind this wall were hidden the idols. A narrow entrance shaped like a window led into it, and through it the priest came to perform the

⁷ Zacharias, *Vita Severi*, in Kugener, *Patrologia Orientalis* 2. 1 (1904).

sacrifices». The raiding party discovered an altar covered in blood. They destroyed «those of the idols which, because of their great antiquity, had already largely deteriorated». After consultation they eventually carried off the other images, some in marble, along with the pagan priest himself, and they brought them all to Alexandria. They put the idols on display in the city: The hagiographer reveals the instant recognition of the people in the street: «You could hear all the people crying out ‘Look at Dionysus, the hermaphrodite. Look at Cronos, who hated children. Look at Zeus, the adulterer and lover of the young. This is Athena, the virgin who loved war. This one is Artemis, the huntress and enemy of strangers. Here is Ares, Apollo’».

The *Life of Severus* takes its hero to the great law school of Beirut in Phoenicia, where we have accounts of widespread magic and the frantic burning of magical books. In Beirut, as in Alexandria and in Aphrodisias, paganism was an integral part of the fabric of society, and although Christian saints and bishops are shown by their hagiographers to have fought valiantly against it, what is perhaps more important is the strength and vigor of the old traditions. Even more significant, as the poet of Aphroditopolis showed us, is the participation of many Christians in the preservation of these traditions. This is not to say that they participated in sacrifices, which were officially outlawed, but that the traditions held meaning for them by evoking cultural roots that they shared with the pagans.

It is for this reason that Christians can be found with pagan mythology depicted in their homes and commemorated in their writings. It is for the same reason that Greek gods and astrological signs turn up in Jewish communities such as Scythopolis in Palestine or Hammath Tiberias in the Galilee. A passion for collecting antique objects shows up in late antiquity and can be documented in several archaeological discoveries. The past was everywhere reappropriated by the present, and if the numinous power of some statues continued, particularly at the sites of indigenous cults, in other areas no conflict of gods can be traced at all. Late antique society was hardly a monolith.

The problems that Julian the Apostate had with the city of Antioch illustrate how the times had changed and the old ways along with them⁸. His attempt to establish an intolerant and demanding paganism not only

⁸ Cf. G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, Harvard 1978, 5th ed. 1997, ch. 9 («Antioch»).

met with hostility from Christians but even from the pagans themselves, who resented the emperor's ascetic regime. The spectacle of Julian's public quarrel with the people of Antioch shows that it was now the Christians who enjoyed the delights of an old-style pagan life in their art, their entertainment, and even their dress. Their incandescent festivals and their smoothly depilated bodies were an affront to the proudly hirsute emperor, who failed to impose, as he wished, a monastic lifestyle on pagans and Christians alike. Julian preened himself on his unkempt and filthy beard in which insects had made their home. But the removal of hair from the body had become widespread and fashionable in cities of the eastern Mediterranean. The practice, which the old Romans had associated with effeminacy, was now a sign of taste and elegance for Hellenized peoples. In late antiquity it represented a symbolic repudiation of the traditional philosopher's beard and all the ostentatious masculinity connected with hair. One of the early Christian apologists lamented that the cities of the Empire (the eastern empire in his case) were full of depilators of all sorts—pluckers, shavers, applicers of pitch⁹. Among the Roman legionaries stationed in the city of Apamea in Syria there was even a staff depilator for the soldiers¹⁰. Try as he might, Julian could not turn the clock back on this espousal of an old eastern custom by the new society of the Byzantine empire. ^

Not surprisingly, therefore, when Julian died, the people of Antioch danced in the streets. No one, not even the pagans, could put up with the fierce and joyless austerity that Julian tried to impose. The modern Greek poet Cavafy understood all this very well when he wrote of the Antiochenes, «How could they ever give up / their beautiful way of life, the range of their daily pleasures, their brilliant theatre, which consummated a union between Art and the erotic proclivities of the flesh? Immoral to a degree—and probably more than a degree— / they certainly were. But they had the satisfaction that their life / was the notorious life of Antioch, / delectable, in absolutely good taste»¹¹.

Without contemporizing the antique, there would have been no such life at Antioch. Christians knew it, Jews knew it, and pagans knew it. Unfortunately for him, Julian did not. One has only to look at the vivid remnants of the environment of the Antiochenes from the city itself and

⁹ Clem. Alex., *Paedag.* III. 3. 3. 15. 3.

¹⁰ *SEG* 37 (1987). 1434.

¹¹ K.P. Cavafis, *Ta Poiēmata* (1919-1933), ed. G.P. Savvidis, Athens 1991, p. 61.

from the elegant suburb of Daphne that lay outside it. Like the beauty contest at New Paphos, a magnificent depiction of the Judgment of Paris, now in the possession of the Louvre, provides a link with the traditions of the Trojan War. The god Dionysus adorned a villa at Daphne, and nearby an image of Menander calls up the repertoire of so-called New Comedy from nearly a millennium before. Strictly pagan images of an apotropaic character remained as useful for protecting homes as they had centuries earlier.

The classical images taken over in late antiquity find a literary echo in the huge epic poem of the Egyptian poet Nonnos, whose work in forty-eight books chronicled the mythological travels of Dionysus and, in the process, hymned the glories of many of the cities and regions that the god traversed. The connection between the past and the present is what makes that poem so much more than a dusty collection of old stories. And we should remember that the poet was also the author of a surviving verse paraphrase of the Gospel of St. John, therefore probably a Christian. All the old markers collapse—between pagan and Christian, pagan and Jew, past and present. Obviously Christians, Jews, and pagans were different, and the past was not the present. But, apart from outbreaks of fanatical vandalism, there was a shared culture across those various religions. The antiquities of the past acquired a new, if altered power in the present.

If one surveys the whole period from Constantine to Muhammad there is no sign of any rupture or break in the social fabric of the late antique empire, which replaced the Roman one. The political system changed with the change in state religion, and the Christian population grew incrementally. But it took with it all the cultural baggage of the pre-Constantinian period. Homer became, if anything, even more important than before, not only through the stories he told but through the language he used (which was imitated in the most remote places, such as in the lava land of southern Syria and in Petra of the sixth century)¹². The popularity of Achilles in late antiquity is a good example with which to interpret the re-use of Homeric material.

The issues of this re-use arise in an acute form in a mosaic from Madaba in Jordan¹³. It concerns the story of Achilles. Here we find

¹² Cf., for example, the newly discovered verse inscription from Petra: AJA 103, 1999, 510, where one can read on the photograph *kai ptoliethron esôse*. For southern Syria, IGR III. 1339, with G.W. Bowersock, *Selected papers on Late Antiquity*, Bari 2000, 103.

¹³ M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman 1993, 76-77.

Achilles and Patroclus, with flaring cloaks attached over their shoulders, standing in full frontal nudity. Their names are written over them, but it is important to observe that the name of Patroklos appears in the *nominative and that of Achilles in the accusative* (ΠΑΤΡΟΚΛΟΣ and ΑΧΙΛΛΕΑ). Achilles is playing on his lyre, an instrument associated with him from the ninth book of the *Iliad* in which the embassy from Agamemnon finds the angry hero playing by the edge of the sea in the company of Patroklos. Beyond a small tree a woman is dancing in a diaphanous dress. Beside her is what has been taken to be a name, ΕΥΒΡΕ. Providing the only surviving testimony to the mosaic's upper register (now lost), a photograph made soon after its discovery proves that there was a Pan playing on his pipes and a whirling figure with castanets. This means that an important part of the scenes on this mosaic included Dionysiac elements, and the dancing woman in the revealing dress may perhaps be one of them. She is normally taken to be Briseis, Achilles' concubine, but it requires monumental faith and little scholarship to accept that ΕΥΒΡΕ is any kind of Greek for Briseis. The beta would have been sounded in this period as a V, and the diphthong ΕΥ would also have been heard with a V (*ev*). It seems to me that we have here an iteration of the V-sound in a word that begins with a syllable *ev-*, although it is unclear whether we have a sequence of EYP or EBP. With the different inflections of the names of Patroklos and Achilles the mosaic may be giving the observer a statement. If that is the case, then we can read Πάτροκλος Ἀχιλλέα εὐρε. It is apparent that the word is not continued farther to the right, unless of course there were letters on the other side of the dancing woman.

The story of Achilles was among the most frequently represented in late antiquity after the careers of Heracles and Dionysos. Numerous studies have documented the iconography of the late antique Achilles. His first bath, a subject that appears only in late antiquity, became nearly as prominent as that of Dionysus. His sojourn as a transvestite on Skyros seems to have been particularly popular. A famous representation on a silver dish from Augst (formerly Kaiseraugst) in Switzerland has recently found a striking parallel in the so-called Sevso Treasure. The story of the hero's concealment among women and the depiction of him «in drag» seem to have been a feature of late antique mimes, to judge from the citations of it in the Apology that a certain Choricus of Gaza composed in defense of the dancers in performances of mimes. One can

readily imagine the dramatic potential of cross-dressing, which Choricus insisted in no way impugned the masculinity of the hero.

The scene on the Madaba mosaic finds its closest parallel in a series of episodes on a bronze *situla* in the palace of the Doria Pamphili at Rome¹⁴. Here Achilles is discovered with his lyre in the company of Patroclus. Subsequent scenes appear to show a woman in a veil being led away at the behest of Agamemnon. She ultimately appears before Achilles, who is playing his lyre. These panels would naturally lead to an interpretation of the woman on the Madaba mosaic as the same figure as we see on the *situla*, and that figure is again normally assumed to be none other than Briseis. But both Homer and the mimetic tradition make plain that Achilles was tempted to return to war by offers of many women, and it might be more prudent to look at the *situla* in the light of the Madaba images rather than the reverse. The Madaba scene clearly puts Achilles into a Dionysian context. The upper register guarantees this, and the dancing pose of the woman in the lower register would be more consonant with a Bacchant than with Briseis. The lyre of Achilles appears to provide the musical accompaniment for the dancer, and the inscription, if read as a statement, informs us of Patroclus entering upon a scene of revelry. This would not be unconnected with the efforts to win Achilles back into battle, but it represents frames from the story that have hitherto been obscure. If we follow the implications of Choricus in looking to the mimes as an explanation of the high degree of uniformity of theme in near eastern mosaics, we can perhaps also find a context for the innovation in representation and, in particular, in unparalleled representations of standard themes at Madaba. These could be understood to show what was seen in the mimes, where, as in the old Folies Bergères, clothes only served to accentuate what was not clothed or could be readily seen underneath. Flaring cloaks, similar to those worn by Patroclus and Achilles, were a standard accessory for pantomimes, and we know that the range of covering for mimes generally could extend to the minimum, namely total nudity. Furthermore, Tatian, addressing the pagan Greeks, proves that masks were not always worn in pantomime since he mocks the facial makeup on an admired performer.

¹⁴ Ch. Delvoye, *Éléments classiques et innovations dans l'illustration de la légende d'Achille au Bas-Empire*, AC 53, 1984, 184-199.

The unifying power of the mimes and their mythological stories provoked the wrath of Jacob of Sarug and others, but his mellifluous Syriac verses tell us what pleasure these entertainments gave ordinary citizens¹⁵. «Do you agree to cherish gods who love adultery?» he asks. «Is your ear willing to have the report of the house of Zeus the adulterer fall upon it? Is it good for you to see the depravity of female idols? Can you endure, being the servant of Jesus, to take delight in Apollo? Do you believe the mimings concerning the hero Heracles?». And the response he imagines his enraptured listener offering to him in justification is this: «The dancing of that place cheers me up...I do not go to believe. I go to laugh. And what do I lose if I laugh and do not believe?».

This is the laughter and the cheer of the mosaics, and the response of the Christian patron of the mimes, as imagined by Jacob of Serug, is precisely the justification offered by the Christian apologist, Choricus. A recent attempt by an eminent scholar in Canada to deny that Choricus was a Christian seems to me to depend fatally on an indefensible argument: because the orator avoids mentioning Christian attitudes, writes of Zeus as the creator of the world, and describes the Islands of the Blest, «what Choricus reveals, perhaps inadvertently, of his deepest assumptions about life and death surely stamps him as a pagan»¹⁶. By this criterion Dioscorus of Aphrodito, certified as a Christian writer, had to have been a pagan, and the whole debate over the confession of Nonnos need never have taken place. But this scholar's opinion is also weakened by the perfect parallel that Choricus provides with Jacob's Christian enthusiast.

The eminent orator of Gaza took up the objection, echoed in Jacob, that watching adultery on the stage was naturally corrupting. But he went on to argue, «Since the whole affair is a kind of playfulness, its objective is song and laughter. Everything is contrived for spiritual refreshment and relaxation. It seems to me that Dionysus, who is, after all, a laughter-loving god (φιλογέλως γὰρ ὁ θεός), has taken pity on our nature. Different cares disquiet different people—the loss of children, grieving over parents, the death of siblings, the demise of a good woman.

¹⁵ C. Moss, *Jacob of Serugh's Homilies on the Spectacles of the Theatre*, «Le Muséon» 48, 1935, 87-112.

¹⁶ T.D. Barnes, *Christians and the Theater*, in W.D. Slater (ed.), *Roman Theater and Society*, Ann Arbor 1996, 161-180, especially 178-179.

Poverty gnaws at many, and dishonor brings grief to many others. It seems to me that Dionysus takes pity on mankind and provides an opportunity for diversion in order to console those who are dispirited... The god is generous and well disposed to humanity, so as to provoke laughter of every kind». The centrality of Dionysus in Choricus' apology, for the mimes is unmistakable. It matches perfectly the Dionysian frame for the mosaic of Patroclus and Achilles at Madaba. Dionysus is the encompassing, enabling inspiration for the mimes and, through them, for the mosaicists who evoked the entertainments of their cities. Madaba affords a glimpse into the collective culture of leisure and relaxation, a culture that coruscates here and there with a tantalizing radiance.

If the traditional stories of Greek mythology reached the broadest public in late antiquity, it was Plato among the intellectuals of the past who bound together those of different faiths in a shared world of thought and philosophy. Athens, Ephesus, and Alexandria were among the major centers of late antique Platonism, known historically as Neoplatonism. Here again there was a regeneration of the past, through which Neoplatonism emerged as something very close to a spiritual rival to Christianity, complete with mysteries and miracles. Christianity itself owed a huge debt to Plato, particularly through Clement and Origen, and even the Jews felt some kinship with Plato through the view articulated earlier by Numenius that Plato was the Greek Moses. The Neoplatonism of the female philosopher Hypatia in Alexandria was combined with an extraordinary brilliance in mathematics and won her almost universal admiration until an outburst of petty Christian terrorism led to her murder. The philosophy of Proclus in Athens remains today a monument of late antique thought. It was produced in a largely Christian city.

Late antique Neoplatonism imported something very close to monotheism into paganism and subverts the common assumption that polytheism and paganism are the same thing. In fact, a recent book on pagan monotheism in late antiquity has now attempted to redress the balance¹⁷. The reader discovers there a clear and independent movement towards a doctrine of pagan monotheism that not only resembles the Christian hierarchy of God, Jesus, and angels but arguably constitutes the necessary precondition for the success of Christianity. Plato was

¹⁷ P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999.

fundamental in this pagan revisionism and therefore provided an intellectual ancestor in common with those Christian apologists, such as Clement and Origen, who were steeped in Greek philosophy. As the editors of the volume put it in their introduction, «Christianity did not convince because it was monotheistic; rather it would appear that in order to convince, it had to be monotheistic in a society which was fast moving in that direction». This is a bracing corrective to what we have heard for centuries from ecclesiastical historians.

It is all too easy to be misled by the patristic sources into thinking in a *Gibbonian* spirit that the ascendance of Christianity had doomed paganism from the start. Late antique paganism was an exceptionally flexible and porous system that could easily be absorbed by less flexible Christians or Jews. It was even capable of borrowing from the Christians, far more subtly and more decisively than in Julian's program. By the end of the fourth century in Egypt it could even celebrate the birth of a divine child with stigmata, and, as we saw at the beginning, it could transform Hermes into a Madonna. Late antiquity rang changes on the old traditions of the past and, in doing so, made them alive in the present. It was clearly a different world from that of Pericles or Augustus, and yet there had been no abrupt break, no rupture, no decline, and no fall. There were subterranean shifts through which the past was appropriated and gradually acquired a new character. It all took place over an expanse of time, so that at any one moment no one could have discerned what was happening.

But the transformation was both subtle and enduring. It can be seen only when viewed across time and was nowhere better described than by Marcel Proust at the end of his great novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In a passage that I cited over a decade ago in my conclusion to a discussion of Hellenism and Islam, the narrator looks back on his long life. The luminous words of Proust can bear repetition. The novelist, as so often, has much to teach the historian:

«There came over me a feeling of profound fatigue at the realization that all this long stretch of time not only had been uninterruptedly lived, thought, secreted by me... but also...that I was perched on its dizzying summit, that I could not move without carrying it about with me. My head swam to see so many years below me, and yet within me, as if I were thousands of leagues in height...as if men were perched on giant stilts, sometimes taller than church spires...I would therein describe men...as occupying in time a place far more considerable than the so

restricted one allotted them in space, a place, on the contrary, extending boundlessly, since, giant-like, reaching far back into the years, they touch simultaneously epochs of their lives—with countless intervening days between—so widely separated from one another in time».

It seems to me that, when surveyed from that Proustian height, late antiquity becomes a temporal space that stretches towards the future with surprising contours that were shaped by the recapturing of its past. In this respect it was strikingly different from the Byzantine centuries to follow when, as Mango argued, «They had before them the debris of a distant past which aroused admiration for their material value and for technical skills which could no longer be reproduced»¹⁸. For those who lived in late antiquity the antique evoked no admiration for a distant past, no nostalgia, no memories of an epoch dead and gone. It was, in Proust's language, lived, thought, and secreted by them. It was the blood in their veins.

Glen W. Bowersock
Institute for Advanced Study — Princeton

¹⁸ See note 4 above.