

HELEN C. EVANS and BRANDIE RATLIFF, eds., *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th–9th Century*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012. Pp. xvii, 332; 425 color figs. \$65. ISBN: 9781588394576. doi:10.1017/S003871341200423X

Entering the exhibition of which this is the catalogue, the first—indeed the only—thing that one saw was a huge mid-sixth-century floor mosaic from Gerasa depicting the cities of Alexandria and Memphis below the dedicatory inscription of the bishop Anastasios and one tiny portion of floral ornament that surely constituted the majority of this pavement. Displayed on a wall of the antechamber to the show, it was thus to be read in a manner utterly alien to the way in which this floor was originally seen in horizontal extension. Yet in New York it served as a perfect emblem of the show and a synecdoche for the old-fashioned view of the period, an “Age of Transition,” the seventh to ninth centuries: disintegrating and apparently dripping down from on high to the ruin below.

For some reason unexplained, in the catalogue the mosaic is represented only by a watercolor made after it was discovered in 1929. This inadequate version is to a lesser extent matched by the other photographs in the book: fine in themselves, in impeccable focus, and just in their color values, they are generally too small to serve as anything but aide-mémoires. Nonetheless, as against this visually unsatisfying furniture, how rich in intellectual content is the book! It offers something without parallel, a *tour d’horizon* not of scholarly thinking of the 1980s and earlier, when correlates were confused with causes, but of the state of research today on late antiquity and early Islamic culture. True, it contains some small mistakes (the “Rightly-Guided” caliphs, not the Umayyads, were “the first generation of Muslim rulers” [10]), and true, it presents some gratuitously modish language: if “Miaphysite,” which it is said offends the Coptic church, is a justifiable substitution for what we used to call “Monophysite,” the term “Islamicate” is surely unnecessary. There are also some omissions and capricious suggestions, such as the proposal that the unique (and now “consolidated” [221]) ivories from al-Humayma (no. 153 A–C), declared without further elaboration, are “remarkably similar in use to those of the Byzantine so-called Grado chair” (222; on which see below), whereas in fact they differ markedly in size (in all cases less than two-thirds the area and one-third the thickness), subject matter (military and court officials), and disposition of the figures (either entirely frontal or in profile), in contrast to the obliquely turned saints, angels, and citizens set against elaborate architectural backgrounds on plaques that are “Byzantine” only in the loosest sense of the word. Incomprehensible is the failure in the case of the Rabbula Gospels to discuss the argument of Massimo Bernabò and his team in 2008: that the images came from an entirely different manuscript and that therefore the exact date of 586 assigned to them by Brandie Ratliff in her entry (no. 39), and everyone writing before her, may no longer stand.

The overriding virtue of the catalogue is its organization where the hand of Helen Evans as auteur is clearly in evidence. Ostensibly divided into two halves, as the title proclaims, these are in fact two physically separate parts of the book, hinging on the indispensable fulcrum of “Commerce” engineered by Thelma Thomas. By this term she means not simply trade and the important material and numismatic testimonies to it but cultural exchange in its broadest sense. The coins themselves, Byzantine and Islamic, are succinctly discussed by Clive Foss, but the glories of this section are Ratliff’s account of Christian communities in the Near East and Thomas’s direct familiarity with the textiles, as well as the circumstances of their movement (and of land management) as witnessed by two scarcely noticed letters on papyrus in Ann Arbor (no. 83).

It is this ability to perceive *multum in parvo* that characterizes Finbarr B. Flood’s lengthy consideration, “Faith, Religion, and the Material Culture of Early Islam,” which constitutes most of the last third of the catalogue and follows a lively overview by Anna Ballian

of the *qusūr*, the desert palaces like al-Mshatta equipped with mosques, baths, audience halls, and irrigation systems. While Flood's final essay, "The Qur'an," is addressed mainly to specialists in the field, his longer, astute disquisition should be the concern of everyone who seeks insight into and connective tissue between belief, politics, and "decoration" in half a dozen mediums. He argues forcefully that in Islam it is unhelpful to distinguish between the secular and the profane, a view that, with respect to Byzantium, I advocated more than a decade ago.

Indeed, he argues cogently, it is in Muslim sacred art that we should recognize the formation of a distinct identity, one that was (and is) profoundly political, a point that I had made apropos of both the sacred and the profane in Byzantium. "Competitive self-definition" in "architectural decoration, dress, hairstyle, and social practice" (254) and, as he suggests later, in the format and modes of embellishment of Qur'ans, is the key, he proposes, to understanding Muslim performance in these domains. I would add that such performances are largely absent from Byzantine productions, which exhibit few such gestures against the new and rival faith, and, at the same time, demonstrate the differences between Byzantine Iconoclasm and Muslim aniconism. (The rhetoric of Orthodox pronouncements both for and against sacred imagery evoke Jewish rather than Islamic practices.)

Even a short review of *Byzantium and Islam* must take notice of at least one other forthright challenge to prevailing opinions and the supposedly scientific foundation in which they are grounded. The utility of radiocarbon dating is indisputable as long as the problems of its interpretation are acknowledged. Yet the general applicability of this approach to textiles on the basis of a single specimen is questioned by Cécilia Fluck (no. 124 A). The chronological niceties of objects in ivory achieved by this means are, of course, complicated by the fact that such findings yield only the date of the elephant's death, not that of the material's carving. In addition to questioning the historicity of a "Grado chair," Gudrun Bühl insists that the different date brackets established by C₁₄ analysis for what are supposed to be its surviving members do not disallow their contemporaneity and that their "identical technical details" and thicknesses of all fourteen (and now possibly fifteen) plaques (no. 24 A–N) show that they "were designed and manufactured for one and the same object" (49). In both these positions she opposes views proposed by Paul Williamson in 2003 and 2008. I have not yet examined those in Milan and therefore will not comment specifically on them. But it is not the case that all are of the same thickness (a datum which would in itself not impede their creation for a single artifact). The Salerno plaques, often said to derive from the "Grado" ivories, vary similarly in this respect, ranging from six to nine millimeters. No less problematical is her suggestion that "freshly exploited tusks as well as stockpiled material" (49) were used. Given the extraordinary skills displayed by the carvers involved, this is, to say the least, unlikely. No medieval ivory sculptor worth his salt would employ "green," i.e., fresh, ivory. This material, unlike silk, which requires "degumming" but no aging before it is spun, would dry out especially on its exposed, i.e., exhibited, surfaces and warp incrementally had it not been allowed to mature before carving. Given the diversity of their iconographies—one series representing the Old and New Testament figures and events, the other scenes from the life of St. Mark—it remains entirely possible that they were prepared for different ends at (slightly) different times.

Debate concerning the Grado ivories will go on. But Bühl's contribution indicates the value of the catalogue as a whole: first, how up-to-date it is in its engagement with recent scholarship and, second and consequently, how indispensable it will be to the furtherance of such discussion.

ANTHONY CUTLER, Pennsylvania State University