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Book Review - Henry Maguire and Eunice Dauterman Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Alicia Walker

*Bryn Mawr College*, [awalker01@brynmawr.edu](mailto:awalker01@brynmawr.edu)

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For decades, scholars of Byzantium have been revamping the image of static orthodoxy and immutable tradition that Byzantine artists and authors so convincingly constructed. Among the misperceptions to be revised is the notion of Byzantium as a purely Christian and exclusively religious culture. As Henry and Eunice Maguire note at the outset of their book, religion was certainly the driving force of Byzantine society. Yet this world was also defined by a range of nonreligious practices and visual traditions, usually grouped under the term "secular." *Other Icons* is the first major study of Byzantine secular art to be published in English, and as such fills a long-standing gap in medieval art history. It covers an expansive time period from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, taking as its departure point the Iconoclastic era (ca. 726–843), after which Byzantium can be said to have shifted from a late antique to a more truly medieval society.

Earlier scholarship on the secular in Byzantium has tended to isolate nonreligious art as an autonomous, marginal aspect of cultural production, independent of the sacred activities at the center. In contrast, the authors propose that the sacred and the secular intersect conceptually and visually throughout Byzantine culture and, for this reason, must be studied in relation to one another. They emphasize that the secular was not merely ornamental or entertaining but generated powerful, meaningful imagery and ideas that worked both against and in tandem with the aims of Christian works of art. In this respect, *Other Icons* is about more than secular Byzantine art: it explores the overlap and mutual dependence between the secular and the sacred in Byzantium. Although this perspective is not entirely new to Byzantine art history, it nonetheless marks a shift from the main current of scholarship both past and present, redirecting the intellectual flow of a subfield that perhaps too often assumes the predominance and exclusivity of Byzantium's Christian identity.

While employing the standard categories of sacred and secular, the authors cast their discussion in alternative terms as well. Most notably, they correlate "sacred" with "official" art, literature, and social practices of the church, and "secular" with an "unofficial" realm of production that offered greater freedom from Christian dictates and the power structures of ecclesiastical and state institutions. This unofficial realm is a potentially subversive space, yet one that depends on the hegemonic sphere of the sacred for its definition. The authors highlight the active dialogue between official and unofficial culture and argue that the realm of the secular is best understood in relation to the sacred, against which it was conceived.

In exploring the parameters and meaning

of secular art, the authors make ample use of textual evidence from a variety of sources. These written accounts support the interpretation of Byzantine reception of nonreligious art and allude to additional categories within which medieval viewers placed objects and images that operated outside the mechanics and authority of Christianity. Much of the literature cited has not previously been brought to bear on this topic, and its synthesis here is a major contribution. These textual sources also reflect the nature of the audience for secular art in Byzantium. Saints' lives and treatises on magic represent the popular beliefs circulating through high and low realms of Byzantine society, while imperial panegyrics and ecclesiastical writings impart the perspective of the elite. Audience is also implied through artistic genre and media. In particular, the authors make extensive use of ceramic evidence, opening important new avenues for appreciating the often neglected domain of nonelite imagery. Studies of Byzantine art commonly focus on a particular medium, affording limited opportunity for thematic investigations. By incorporating a broad range of both monumental and portable works of art, the authors highlight trends across media and provide a comprehensive interpretation of the topic at hand. The book is generously illustrated, with 150 black-and-white images and 8 colorplates of excellent quality.

Also worthy of note is the authors' consistent effort to compare aspects of Byzantine secular art to those of other subfields, in particular, European medieval and Renaissance art. The specialist may find these comments at times less relevant to the immediate topic or may question the need to cast Byzantine art in terms of Western cultures. But these observations serve, however, to place the material in relation to other, perhaps more widely known traditions and furnish the nonspecialist reader with meaningful points of access to unfamiliar territory.

The main body of the text is divided into thematic chapters, which grow from the Maguires' prolific and groundbreaking scholarship generated over several decades. *Other Icons* productively builds on interpretations of Byzantine art and culture articulated in their earlier studies, which have fundamentally shaped current understanding of diverse issues, including the magic and miraculous properties accorded material culture by Byzantine viewers; the utility of literary rhetoric in elucidating the visual rhetoric of Byzantine art; the tightly controlled formal features of sacred icons that defined the orthodox Christian image in the wake of iconoclasm; Byzantine attitudes toward the natural world; and the recuperation of popular culture within the larger discourse of Byzantine art history.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 1, "Novelties and Invention in

HENRY MAGUIRE AND EUNICE  
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Byzantine Art,” considers motifs of fantastic beasts and pagan deities—such as centaurs, Sirens, Simurghs, Pan, and Eros—that combine features of animals and humans to create hybrid forms. The authors cite a variety of Byzantine “official” texts (such as saints’ lives and ecclesiastical commentaries) that condemn these inventive figures because of their unnatural mixing of discrete animal and human characteristics. They contrast this imaginative creativity with the Byzantine value for consistent and controlled adherence to recognized prototypes in the production of sacred icons, which accurately depict standardized representations of holy people. At the heart of this discussion is the concept of *taxis* (order), which required the observance of categorical boundaries as dictated by the perceptible world (albeit one in which the perceptible was believed to extend beyond modern definitions of natural phenomena, to include, for instance, angels and griffins).

Having demonstrated that sacred art typically follows canons of order and natural form, the authors survey a range of secular and sacred objects that evince Byzantine interest in and enjoyment of precisely the kinds of hybrid beasts condemned in official sources. They account for this deviation from expected norms by establishing an alternative tradition of secular texts (for example, romances and *ekphrasés* of classical art) that reveal Byzantine appreciation for mixture and innovation and a subversive response to the regimented, prescriptive nature of sacred art. At the same time, they recognize the conformity of hybrid beasts to pagan and foreign models. Like sacred art, Byzantine secular art can be said to exhibit its own prototype-bound tendencies; a similar concern for disciplined imitation dictated artistic production in the secular, unofficial realm.

Chapter 2, “Marvels of the Court,” examines the material and ceremonial culture of imperial banquets and their construction of royal power through the symbolism of food, entertainment, furniture, and the decoration of dining implements encountered in the real and imagined halls of the Byzantine palace. Textual sources, both historical and fictional, offer a vivid impression of the carefully orchestrated spectacles staged for the ruler and his audience. The authors return to the concept of the hybrid, revealing how the transgression of natural order through the mixing of categories—for example, fowl and lamb or pig and fish in a single culinary dish, or marvels of physical dexterity in acrobatic performances that defied the normal limits of human capabilities—would have honored the Byzantine ruler as powerful enough to override the laws of nature. While chapter 1 focuses on the observance of categorical divisions and *taxis* as a constitutive feature of sacred and royal art and authority, chapter 2 argues

that boundaries could also be creatively transgressed to convey a different expression of the emperor’s miraculous might.

In addition to showing how the court was a site for crossing the limits of nature, chapter 2 characterizes this realm as one in which the permeability of boundaries between Byzantium and its medieval contemporaries was likewise on display. Foreign emissaries to the capital and exotic artistic styles and objects participated in the wondrous image of control that the Byzantine ruler depicted through court spectacles. The emperor’s ability to manipulate foreign people and things further manifested his authority, which at times may have appeared almost magic in nature. The dynamic, extravagant performance of transgression that the authors describe strikingly contrasts with the more familiar, official image of the emperor as a Christomimetic figure reigning over a strictly regimented, heavenlike court. Yet this more profane imperial image is consistent with the notion that the emperor shared in some mysterious way the creative power and supernatural authority of Christ and God. Thus, although speaking of activities and spaces outside the official realms of the church and Christianity, the second chapter still returns to one of the overarching arguments of the book: that secular and sacred could contribute toward common goals, even when they ostensibly followed different sets of rules.

Chapter 3, “Animals and Magic in Byzantine Art,” proposes that a radical shift in the meaning of animal imagery transpired between the pre- and post-Iconoclastic eras, and that this transformation in profane imagery was informed by new definitions of the mechanics of sacred icons. The Maguire’s posit that in the early Byzantine era, three ways of viewing animal imagery were in operation: first, a literal reading that took animal imagery at face value; second, an allegorical interpretation that ascribed symbolic, typically Christian, significance to animal depictions; and third, a talismanic view that understood animal images to be imbued with supernatural benevolent and malevolent forces. The authors propose that the allegorical significance of animal emblems declined in the post-Iconoclastic era, and that these motifs functioned in an increasingly talismanic manner. In particular, they were positioned in liminal zones of churches, where they guarded the transition between sacred and profane spaces, and were placed on everyday objects, such as ceramic tableware, that aimed to defend medieval diners from the potential harm of impure foods. The authors contend that after the Iconoclastic era, animal images came to function as “profane icons”: much as the image of a saint channeled the power of the holy person, so an animal emblem could serve as the conduit for the protective (or malevolent) power of the beast it de-

icted. In this way, apparently mundane animal images operated according to the mechanics of Christian art and functioned as talismanic agents in both sacred and secular contexts.

The works of art considered in this section, like those of the first chapter, derive from a variety of contexts, both holy (such as church decoration) and profane (such as magic treatises). Accordingly, these objects and monuments do not strictly adhere to discrete categories of sacred and secular and therefore provide an intriguing case study for closer scrutiny of the classifications that Byzantine viewers may have applied to these images and the spaces in which they appeared. In the final passage of *Other Icons*, the authors reflect that “‘secular’ may be a misleading term for the works of art discussed in this book, because today the concept of secularity often implies a lack of association with the supernatural. For the Byzantines, however, these works were profane icons, with powers as potent as the sacred images themselves” (p. 167). Indeed, the animal imagery examined in chapter 3 challenges the relevance of modern distinctions between secular and sacred because, as the authors demonstrate, it combated otherworldly threats that were ubiquitous and hence relevant to the official and unofficial spheres.

Chapter 4, “Byzantine Art and the Nude,” explores the shifting values of human nakedness in Byzantine art across a variety of media and genres. In the official sphere, nudity was frowned on as shameful, although it possessed positive values when associated with, for example, ascetic saints or hermetic philosophers, who humiliated and denied the body in search of spiritual and intellectual purity. Likewise, Christ’s nudity referred positively to his human nature and the mortality that allowed him to redeem mankind through physical suffering and death. In its negative connotations, nudity conveyed the shame of Adam and Eve, the threatening power of demons and pagan deities, or the deprived antics of popular entertainers. Thus, nudity evoked multivalent references, determined by the identity of specific characters and the contexts of their depictions.

With regard to the overarching theme of the book—the articulation of the properties of secular art in Byzantium—chapter 4 suggests that the meaning of nudity did not strictly adhere to distinctions between categories of secular and sacred. Positive connotations were generated from both ancient philosophers and Christian saints; negative significance was accorded to the proto-parents Adam and Eve as well as mischievous Eros and *grylloi* (clownlike performers). While animal talismans maintain similar functions and meanings regardless of context, in the case of human nudity, meaning shifts dramatically from one situation to an-

other. As in chapter 3, inconsistency across secular and sacred categories implicitly calls into question the applicability of these modern concepts to the analysis of Byzantine art.

Chapter 5, "Decorum, Merrymaking, and Disorder," returns to the theme of *taxis* and introduces its opposite, *ataxia* (disorder), as a distinguishing feature of secular art. While ecclesiastical and imperial ritual and imagery projected qualities of implacable reserve and static authority, popular spectacles and illustrations of Greco-Roman mythology shared an aesthetic of dynamic, even frenzied action. The oppositional nature of these visual languages is seen, for example, in the characterization of heretics as disorderly Bacchantes, the manic followers of the pagan god of wine, Dionysus. The authors interpret exaggerated, chaotic movement as a feature of unofficial and irreligious representations, which conveyed subversive messages when employed as mockeries of official imagery and afforded pleasurable release from the regimented order of the sacred sphere.

The Maguires summarize the characteristics of secular culture addressed throughout the book as aligning with themes of "recombination, violence, nudity, and movement" (p. 157), which together fulfilled viewers' needs for pleasure and power outside of orthodox Christian norms. They define the secular realm as embracing qualities and aesthetics that were potentially anathema to the official values of church and state, but that nonetheless circulated throughout Byzantine consciousness and visual culture. In distinguishing between secular and sacred, they explain that while the Byzantines clearly enjoyed deviant and illicit imagery and recognized the force of non-Christian talismans, they knew better than to emulate or venerate them, and they scorned those who did. Furthermore, when ostensibly secular imagery was deployed in Christian contexts (such as combatant animals on the walls of churches), these motifs were introduced for the benefit of the sacred: on the one hand, protecting it, and on the other hand, enhancing its sanctity in contrast to the baseness of profane imagery. Through their competition, sacred and secular art reinforced one another.

A final feature of secular imagery that the authors emphasize is its power, realized, for example, through possession by demonic forces in the case of pagan motifs, or through natural endowment in the case of emblems of wild beasts. In defense against the allure of pagan imagery, the Byzantines, it is argued, employed a number of strategies to prevent improper use of these non-Christian representations, including neutralizing them with the application of sacred emblems (such as the cross), defusing them by means of mockery, and disempowering them through imprecision of depiction. As

the authors astutely observe, modern notions of secular art are often divorced from the supernatural, but in the Byzantine world such distinctions did not necessarily exist. Secular imagery could exercise extraordinary otherworldly force, requiring special regulation to control and harness it in the interests of normative, Christian needs.

*Other Icons* makes a major contribution through its innovative interpretation of Byzantine art, which moves across scholarly boundaries that often segregate portable from monumental works of art, secular from sacred realms, high from low culture. This is no easy task, and the authors accomplish it admirably. By juxtaposing—both visually and conceptually—categories of artistic production and social practice that are rarely considered in tandem, they make a strong case for the value of a more holistic approach to Byzantine art and culture. One example of the benefit to be gained is the compelling thesis that expectations for the mechanics of sacred images, especially their supernatural potency, might have shaped attitudes toward profane art as well, leading to both the deployment of powerful secular talismans and anxiety regarding the threat of pagan images. The authors expand a range of interpretative possibilities for a field that has, perhaps, too long taken Byzantine authors at their word regarding the separateness of sacred and secular, official and unofficial culture.

A tethering of sacred and secular as mutually defining terms offers a productive and fresh perspective on the material under question. Yet over the course of the book, the categories themselves become somewhat protean. Beyond its association with the unofficial, the secular is loosely defined in the introduction as encompassing subcategories including the exotic, the erotic, the subversive, and the nonelite. Implicitly, the secular is also characterized by the court, pagan mythology, epic, romance, nature, and corporeality. But many of these classifications overlap and intersect with the sacred realm to such an extent that their identification as secular begs further specification. Surely the authors are right to see flux among classifications, but in response the reader may wonder if modern terms are at all appropriate for the material at hand.

In their conclusion, the Maguires distinguish between categories in terms of degree: common elements—hybrids, nudity, disorder—are found in both secular and sacred spheres, but their concentration and exaggeration are more intense in the profane realm, where they tend to assume a negative cast. Furthermore, they acknowledge the way in which a modern perspective risks creating false dichotomies and obscuring the categories actually shaping this material. But what specific terms did the Byzantines themselves employ, and how

consistent were these classifications over time or across social strata?

Any survey of a topic as vast as secular art in medieval Byzantium must make choices, and one does not envy the authors this process of organization and exclusion. They have judiciously selected themes of dialogue between official and unofficial, elite and nonelite art that structure the discussions in each chapter, allowing larger patterns to emerge from a gaze across the *longue durée* of Byzantine culture. But the virtue of clarity has perhaps been achieved at the expense of a direct acknowledgment of the messiness and elusiveness of the subject they address.

For instance, greater transparency regarding the radically diachronic methodology at work is perhaps in order. The authors attend to some distinctions across the ages, especially in their concluding chapter, where they note an increased openness to the profane in the twelfth as opposed to the tenth century. Still, one anticipates that more remains to be said about shifts in attitude over the six-hundred-plus years surveyed here, a question that should be of concern to any future study that revisits these themes and materials. How reliable is a picture drawn from a mixture of eighth-through fourteenth-century evidence from diverse literary and artistic genres? Is it appropriate to suggest that there was "a" medieval Byzantine perspective on the topics surveyed? Do we do ourselves a disservice by eliding differences across time and geography in order to generate a coherent impression of medieval Byzantine secular art and culture? At the same time, it must be noted that by casting a wide net, the authors identify the rich variety of material available for study and establish useful guideposts for subsequent endeavors.

In this regard, it is regretted that a "Frequently Cited Sources" was chosen in lieu of a full bibliography. As the first major survey of Byzantine secular art in English, this book will serve both specialists and nonspecialists as an essential resource for many years to come. Relevant studies, including several by the authors themselves, are missing from the list of works cited (although important citations are buried in the endnotes).<sup>2</sup> These omissions belie the pertinent, if decentralized, scholarly activity on the subject of secular art and culture in Byzantium, much of which is dispersed throughout journals and essay collections familiar only to specialists in the topic. For this reason a comprehensive, up-to-date bibliography on the subject is greatly desired and still awaited.

In sum, this is an extremely important book, one that makes a highly original and much needed contribution to a fascinating field that is ripe for new work. It is written in a lively, accessible style that will captivate the general as well as the specialist reader.

The text could even serve effectively in advanced introductory courses on medieval art. Most significantly, it opens the topic of Byzantine secular art to further inquiry, which might engage more discrete bodies of material, thematic topics, or chronological periods in order to tease out some of the nuances of interpretation that have, by necessity, been somewhat elided in a book as ambitious and comprehensive as this. *Other Icons* is successful in what it sets out to accomplish, drawing a coherent picture of medieval Byzantine art that establishes patterns of consistency in specific realms of secular production across a period of over six hundred years. It analyzes this phenomenon in a holistic manner that questions false boundaries and dichotomies between the sacred and secular realms while still recognizing these forces as distinct and powerful aspects of Byzantine identity. *Other Icons* is exciting and provocative, both for the innovative and persuasive interpretations it offers on secular art in Byzantium and for the intriguing issues it illuminates for further study.

ALICIA WALKER is assistant professor of medieval art and architecture at Washington University in St. Louis [Department of Art History and Archaeology, CB 1189, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, Mo. 63130].

## Notes

1. In addition to the publications listed in the "Frequently Cited Sources" (pp. 189–92), also see Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Eunice Dauterman Maguire, H. Maguire, and Maggie J. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzis, E. D. Maguire, and H. Maguire, *Ceramic Art from Byzantine Serres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and H. Maguire, ed., *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2004).
2. See n. 1 above, and also by Henry Maguire, "Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art," *Gesta* 28, no. 2 (1989): 217–31; "The Cage of Crosses: Ancient and Medieval Sculptures on the 'Little Metropolis' in Athens," in *Thymiamaste mneme tes Laskarinas Boura*, 2 vols. (Athens: Benaki Museum, 1994), vol. 1, 169–72; "The Profane Aesthetic in Byzantine Art and Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999): 189–205; and "Other Icons: The Classical Nude in Byzantine Bone and Ivory Carvings," *Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 62 (2004): 9–20.