THE MYTH REGARDING THE DESTRUCTION OF ANCIENT HELLENIC MONUMENTS BY CHRISTIANS

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Among the high-sounding Neo-pagan arguments against Christianity is the one that claims a supposed systematic and organized destruction of ancient Hellenic monuments by Christians; an argument which has taken on the form of a stereotyped myth that is reproduced according to prevailing circumstances. It is a fact that, in the reciprocative passion of numerous "christians", who in the 4th century had moved on to a phase of retaliation, a destruction of ancient Hellenic monuments which had preserved the worshipping of idols did take place. But it is only within the mentalities of that era that one should attempt any scientific research. It suffices for one to study the younger work of Saint Athanasius the Great, "Against idols" (**1**), to comprehend the theological grounds for such actions. Besides, History does not preoccupy itself with damnations, but with interpretations. A scientific approach of events is the only means that can provide us with potentials for safer judgments and conclusions. We need to invoke the findings of the research performed by acclaimed archaeologists, who summarize the data arising from the extensive scientific research of their colleagues as well as their own. In 1994, a study by Mrs. Polymnia Athanasiades, Athens University Professor was published, with the title "The twilight of the gods in the Eastern Mediterranean: Analytical data for three individual regions" (**2**). With her profound knowledge and diligence, Mrs. Athanasiades utilizes the findings of her area's research on the contested topic. She has firstly selected "*three regions of the empire with a different geographical physiognomy, historical background and demographic composition*", thus securing far more credibility to her research. These regions were Hellas, Constantinople and Syria-Palestine. In this way, she easily tackles "*Livanios' generalizations*", as well as the "*excessively large number of literary testimonies*" by both Christian and gentile authors on the subject of destroyed temples, which border on -in her words- "*suspicious*"! "*In their attempt to make heroes out of various bishops and emperors, in a period when religious fanaticism was considered a virtue, quite often certain religious authors attributed imaginary destructions of temples to them; in the best case, they would merely over-exaggerate their heroic feats*". On the other hand, there is a surplus of gentiles' threat-mongery, intended to present "*themselves as martyrs, and their world-theory as the object of a systematic and cruel persecution which was conducted illegally, in the*

framework of a theoretically religiously tolerant empire". This is why the author recommends a "*cautious stance*" towards every criticism. Besides, the religious tolerance of emperors, as for example Constantine the Great, is already a proven fact! The transfer of idolatrous monuments into the new capital (Constantinople/New Rome) for the purpose of adorning it may have deterred the continuation of local worshipping, however, it also highlighted the artifacts even more, as they were displayed within that very (eventually Christian) capital city. Nevertheless, Constantine the Great had "*systematically striven to secure for his city the collaboration of all divine powers*". Thus, apart from the Christian temples (Saint Irene, Holy Apostles), he also dedicated two temples to gentile deities: the goddesses Rhea and Fortune. Mrs. Athanasiades continues: "*In places like Athens and Delphi, as a rule, the later strata had been destroyed by the archaeologists themselves, in their attempt to reach as quickly as possible to the classical substratum*".

Archaeologists attribute the observed destructions to earthquakes, to the barbaric invasions (4th - 6th centuries) and to abandonment. The ancient monuments of Athens and Delphi were left untouched by the Christians. Their transformation into Christian churches indisputably proves the peoples' awareness of historical continuity, as much as this may displease contemporary antiquity-lovers. As it is my custom to say, Fathers such as the Three Hierarchs were not only Hellenes, but also the bearers of the uppermost Hellenic education. They were not foreigners who descended upon the Hellenic scene to "destroy and obliterate"; they were Hellenes, who knew how to objectively appreciate matters, without any recourse to fanaticisms and wild extremes. Their criteria were spiritual. They were acquainted with the fallacy of idolatry, but were incapable of acts of violence.

This awareness of historical continuance by the Hellene-Christians who had not rejected the civilization of their ancestors but only their religion -which was nothing more than a nostalgia for the 'in Christ Truth' as pointed out by the Apostle Paul on the Rock of Mars in Athens- (**3**) is also supported by Mrs. Athanasiades: «*The churches and the chapels which were found scattered around and inside the temple of Apollo (at Delphi), underline the continuation of the religious tradition of the land*." As religious and cultural specialists have also admitted, if an ancient Hellene were to "wake up" and find himself in the midst of a Christian festival, he would not feel like a stranger in that environment. It is characteristic how nowadays, many critics of Orthodox popular religiosity - especially the Hellenic one - are inclined to resort to the aforementioned argument, forgetting that Hellenic religiosity has remained intact and that only its orientation has changed. Besides, Hellenic polytheism was -according to many religious experts (for example Philippides)- nothing more than a religious hypostatizing of the attributes of the one deity. «*The vandalizing of sacred objects (by Christian Hellenes) was a rare act in Hellas*», as Mrs. Athanasiades confirms. Instances of vandalizing were isolated. «*The general impression in Hellas is that, despite the inherent intolerance of their religion, the waning ancient faith inspired the neophyte Christians with respect and often with a certain degree of sentimentality*." Even the not-so-tolerant Constantios (337-361) "*did not appear to have touched any temples*", and even "*the refined Christians of the imperatorial environment looked upon the ancient sanctums as works of art and not as residences of demons*".

Fanatics of course were never absent, as in every era, but their exhortations for destruction as a rule found no reciprocation. Up until the time of Justinian, ancient national monuments continued to flow into Constantinople. It was only in places where there was "*no contact with the urban education of the Hellenic-Roman world*" - in other words, beyond the historical Hellenic region - that the "*traditional religion had much stronger roots*" and where fanaticism was observed and destructions took place. This occurred to a larger degree in the East (Syria-Phoenicia-Palestine). But Mrs. Athanasiades interprets these behaviors with her scientific criteria, in other regions, such as Syria: «...*Here, we do not have an unalloyed case of religious fanaticism, but an*

outburst of social and racial hatred; a subconscious national movement in a religious -naturally- guise». And this view is supported by research performed by various specialists. It is with this, same criteria that later behaviours can also be interpreted, without of course disregarding the provocations of nationalist groups. Where provocations do not prevail, behaviours remain unchecked.

We have purposely exploited the research of our select colleague extensively, because it offers us significant potentials to interpret and comprehend those things that the mistrust, the malice and also the anti-Hellenic expediencies of foreign circles systematically misinterpret.

The findings of Mrs. Athanasiades were brought to my attention in a most significant for me communication (on the 19th July 2000) by the renowned archaeologist and memorable friend, Angelos Choremis, during an interpretation of the case of Theodosius the Great. According to his written statement: "*The decree of Theodosius the Great (191-193 A.D.) mentions the prohibiting of worship in ancient sanctums as well as the entry into temples, but it does not command their destruction. Besides, there does not seem to be any evidence of such destruction, at least according to the excavations. The major centers of the ancient religion, which are precisely the ones that logically should have undergone the greatest destruction - for example Delphi, Olympia, Dodoni, the sanctums of Athens e.a. - do not appear to have undergone any destruction by human hands at the end of the 4th century, from what the excavations have shown us. Furthermore, many temples of the ancient faith were preserved almost intact up to our day, especially in lower Italy and in Sicily where Theodosius the Great also reigned, but also in Hellas proper, for example the Acropolis complex of Athens, the temple of Haephaestus (Vulcan), and the temple of the Ilissos river*». In fact, in the Codex of Theodosius (XVI 10,25), "*it is permitted for Christians to convert the ancient temples into Christian ones*" which explains why they were not destroyed, but in fact were preserved as they were (an example is the "100-portal" church erected by Saint Helen in the 4th century on Paros Island, dedicated to the Holy Mother, which was discovered by the major archaeologist A. Orlandos). In the opinion of the acclaimed byzantinologist Mr. Dionysios Zakynthinos, this decree was drafted, specifically for the purpose of saving the temples. «*Therefore, there are no state politics that encouraged the destruction of ancient sanctums». «What actually happened, was certain destructions and extreme actions at a local level, by fanatic ecclesiastic and political factors, especially towards the statues of ancient deities, the more frequent phenomenon being the breaking off of noses and the destruction of faces. (However, we should not consider that every destroyed statue is proof of Christian vandalism. Many statues were destroyed by other causes, while many were transported to Constantinople, for the adorning of the new capital). These people exacerbated the mob, which was not a difficult thing to do, given that barely 75-80 years separated that era from the terrible persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius (311) and 55-60 years from the milder persecution of Licinius (320-324). The exacerbated mob was unleashed to burn and destroy everything Gentile it found in its path. However, this was not the policy of Theodosius the Great and, as we shall see, when it did occur, he tried to end it and heal it.»*

And Angelos Choremis adds: «*On the road towards the new religion there is undoubtedly a certain amount of pressure on the part of Christians, but no state-directed violence. There are no testimonies of persecutions such as those that the Christians had undergone a few years earlier, nor any violent christianizations like those that took place in Charlemagne's time, or with the Spanish reconquista etc.. Extreme actions have been recorded, and quite often savage ones, but they were always limited, both in place and in duration. What is strange is not the savagery per se that had taken place; the strange thing was that so comparatively few instances had taken place, given the tortures that the Christians had been subjected to*». Displays, therefore, of fanaticism by individuals are observed -also according to Angelos Choremis- in the spirit of revenge; however, this was never the policy of Theodosius the Great (to reiterate on an emperor who was so grievously misjudged).

The extant work "The words of Livanios of Antioch to Theodosius the king, In support of Sanctums" (No.30). The important orator and teacher (314-393) and prominent representative of waning Hellenic antiquity, teacher to the blessed Chrysostom, had written this text in 386, addressing it to the emperor Theodosius I (379-395), complaining about the stance of the more fanatic monks (of Antioch) against the gentile temples.

In order to comprehend Livanios' stance towards Christianity, we should note that he was a faithful follower of idolatry, who sacrificed to its deities and resorted to soothsaying. He had furthermore become initiated in various gentile rituals. The blessed Chrysostom referred to him as "the most pious of all" (**4**). He had believed in the Emperor Julian's endeavor and in the resurrection of the idolatrous world, despite the fact that he had displayed pro-Christian tendencies during his youth. Julian had however influenced him, just as he had in turn been influenced by Livanios, whose works he was studying and had thus indirectly become his pupil(**5**)

The brilliant expert on antiquity, Angelos Choremis, comments on Livanios' work in the following manner:

"*...Livanios' address "**In support of Sanctums**" was not written on account of the extreme acts that took place supposedly in conformance to the decree opposing the ancient religion, given that the decree was issued in 391, whereas Livanios' work was written in 386 - in other words, five whole years earlier, on another occasion.(**6**) Theodosius had appointed as second in charge in the East a certain compatriot and personal friend, the Iberian Maternus Quinegius. This person was fanatically intolerant and maniacal. He had indeed incited the mob - at the head of which were certain fanatic monks - and had proceeded to destroy ancient sanctums, initially the small (and unprotected) sanctums of the countryside and eventually, then began to enter the cities and destroy the sanctums there also. That was when Livanios wrote his famous address "**In support of Sanctums**". (The reaction thereafter by the religiously intolerant Theodosius was to forbid the entry of monks into the cities (thus protecting the national urban sanctuaries) and after Maternus Quinegius' death, he placed as second in charge of the East a more prudent gentile, Eutolmius Tatianus, who succeeded in calming things down and bringing about a general reconciliation. All of the above bear witness to the fact that it was never the official policy of Theodosius to destroy the ancient world, and specifically by means of extreme vandalizations, as is customarily said. They also bear witness to Livanios' prestige in the eyes of the supposedly pietist king - a prestige that became even more evident when, with his two other addresses, "**To Theodosius the King, regarding the mutiny**" and "**To Theodosius the King, regarding reconciliations**", he succeeded in saving Antioch, which had mutinied. In this endeavour, he had the auxiliary support of Flavian, Bishop of Antioch, whose address appears to have been written by a young Christian cleric and student of Livanios: Saint John the Chrysostom. So, we see from all this that Livanios also collaborated with Christians, whenever common goals demanded it....*"

We shall attempt a comment on Livanios' collaboration with Christians, as previously highlighted with scientific conscientiousness by a memorable friend.

Those persons tackled events in a natural manner and not within a fictitious clime of rivalry, of the sort that the fanatics (on both sides) of our time purposely create. Weren't there similar instances of collaboration and coexistence throughout the long period of Byzantium/Romany? In fact, the most characteristic one was the collaboration between two ideological opponents - whose opposition is purposely and artfully exaggerated nowadays - that is, between the Ecumenical Patriarch Gennadius II Scholarius and the pundit supporter of the ancient religion, George Plython-Gemistos. The latter had not hesitated to participate in the Ferrara-Florence Council (1438-1439) - as a member of the Orthodox delegation - for the purpose of assisting the Orthodox Church in the tragic -at the time- moments that She and the Nation were going through. He had given battle there with his scientific expertise, in support of Orthodoxy (he had

proved the fraudulence of a manuscript that had been presented by the Latins) and along with Saint Mark of Ephesus, he refused to sign the Union with Papism. Despite their ideological-spiritual backgrounds, both of them regarded the Union as a subjugation to Papism and therefore damaging to the Nation. However, this behavior can only be found in the reasoning of those who truly love the Nation; Today's neo-Paganists on the other hand almost as a rule do not love the Nation and Hellenism - despite their declarations - because, by attacking Orthodoxy (which is indissolubly joined to Hellenicity), all they succeed in doing is to gradually disintegrate it.

On the matter of the destruction of ancient monuments by "Christians" and apart from the conclusions of Mrs. Athanasiades, there is also the work of the archaeologist Mr. Gerasimos Pagoulatos, "The Destruction and conversion of ancient temples into Christian Churches during the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries", Theology vol. 65 (1964), pages 152-170.

It is worth noting that even the neo-paganist magazine "Davlos" (Torch) in its edition No.138 of June 1993, pages 8022-23, mentions: «Almost all the destroyers of ancient Hellenic monuments are Judean Christians; in other words, Hebrews. The Gentile Christians - in other words, the Hellenes - rarely participated in persecutions of Hellenes».

Equally significant also is the fact that the renowned iconoclast (but also an important historical researcher and systematic presenter of the "negative side"), Kyriakos Simopoulos, while speaking of "the abominable barbarities of the Christians" (page 112 onwards) towards the ancient monuments, he does not omit to insert a chapter titled "The Byzantine person preserves with reverence the tradition of the ancient Hellenic art" (p.208 onwards)(**7**).

Here are some excerpts from the aforementioned book by Kyriakos Simopoulos:

«...It has been historically documented that there was an educational and sentimental continuation of the ancient Hellenic civilization in Byzantium, not only by the intelligentsia, but also by the populace, and at times, even by the authorities. The Emperor of Nicaea, Theodore Doukas Laskaris (1254-1258), during his visit to Pergamus, is deeply moved in the presence of the relics of the ancient monuments and the works of art, and he expresses admiration and reverence for the masterpieces of his ancestors. He is fully aware of what "West" means, following the invasion of the Crusaders and the destruction of the City [..]

The first Emperor -Constantine- aspires to make the "regnant city" alike to Rome. And he hastens to adorn it with works of art, continuing thus the roman tradition of confiscation. He transfers over to Constantinople innumerable statues (especially copper ones), pillars, etc (**8**) from the major cities of the eastern (but also of the western) regions of the empire: from Athens, the Aegean, Ionia, Cyprus, Crete, Rome, Sicily and other places. (**9**) ...(pages 209-20).

Constantine will also utilize the Hellenic cultural tradition for his own, personal glory, by relating the copper statue of Apollo which he had placed atop the famous purple column in the Agora - the "circular purple pillar"(**10**) - to his imperatorial grandeur. On the head of the statue, which he dedicated to himself, he positioned "the nails from the Crucifix of Christ" radially, so that it would shine like the Sun...(page 211) (**11**).

Traditional, therefore, aesthetics and the ages-old cultural education had not been extinguished, despite the vandalisms of the first Christians to the classical monuments. And it will never be extinguished in the Hellenic world. This explains the preservation of so many sculptures in Constantinople, up until the invasions of the Western Barbarians. Losses were attributed only to earthquakes, fires and internal riots - uprisings of the populace, clashes and suppressions.

The Christians of the capital admired the statues that adorned their city...(pages 212-213)

The Byzantine intellectuals - including theologians- have a profound knowledge of

the ancient art and they have unreservedly expressed their infinite admiration. References were many - during the Byzantine era - to the ancient Hellenic civilization and its prominent creators, as well as to comparisons between Byzantine iconography and classical art forms, which revealed in parallel their artistic ideals...(pages 226-227)»
Dear Conventioneers,

My text did not try to appear original, but only to prove - through the research of acclaimed archaeologists - the unscientific fanaticism of the neo-pagans and its generalizations on a topic which has a central place in their anti-Christian polemics. Authentic Christians, and especially the Hellenes, honoured the art of their ancestors and they inherited their artistic spirit, in order to move on, to their own, purely Hellenic, artistic creations.

Notes:

- **1**) 318, not "against Hellenes"; this title is a later one, which was added by the publishers.**2**) Periodical magazine "ELLINIKA", vol.44, Thessaloniki 1994, pgs. 31-50
- **3**) Acts 17:23. The Apostle Paul does not destroy or distort Hellenic religiosity; instead, he steers it towards the long-anticipated, True God.
- **4**) Saint John Chrysostom, "To a recently widowed woman", 1
- **5**) See the article by Panagiotis Christou in Religious and Ethical Encyclopedia (R.E.E. - Θ.Η.Ε) , vol.8, 1960, vs. 294-299 with bibliography
- **6**) P. Petit, "Sur la date du 'pro Templis' de Libanius", en Byzantion XXX (1951), fasc I. 285-310
- **7**) See his book: "the looting and incursion of Hellenic Antiquities", Athens 1997.
- **8**) «...furthermore, after collecting all the copper artifacts and the wooden idols from the various temples and cities, he set them up to adorn the city; likewise the columns of the promenades...» from "Patria (traditions) of Constantinople", Preger publications vol.II, p. 145.
- **9**) «...for, many exceptional statues were taken from Rome and placed in the Hippodrome, sixty of which were exquisite, twenty of them being of Augustus. And from Nicomedia, many columns were brought over. Similarly from Athens and Kyzicus and Caesaria and Trallae and Sardes and Mokesus and from Sebastia and Satalae and Chaldea and Antioch the great and Cyprus and from Crete and Rhodos and Chios and Attaleia and Smyrna and Seleucis and from Tyanes and Ikonion and Bithyna of Nicaea and from Sicily and from all the cities of the east and the west they brought over columns, by Constantine the Great». G. Kodinos, "Deviations from book Chronicles regarding the traditions of Constantinople" Bonne publications 1843, p. 53. The word "stele" signifies "statue". «Plant your all-golden stele in the palace" - Kallimachus and Chrysorrhoe, verse 1172
- **10**) According to George Kedrinos, the "purple pillar" was erected in 320; according to the Paschalion Chronicle, in 328. The statue of Apollo had been removed, according to the Byzantine chronographer Michael Glykas, from Helioupolis of Phrygia. The temple of Apollo was closed down by Constantine (Eusebius, "On the life of Constantine the King", C, 55-56). According to Manouil Chrysoloras, a Cross was originally placed atop the "purple pillar". He writes: "...regarding the purple pillar bearing the cross, constructed and established during the reign of the great Constantine, which (cross) conquered all the statues and all the columns..." (Epistle of the learned Manouil Chrysoloras to John the king, in which he compared the old and the new Rome).
- **11**) «...By way of depicting the Sun, he erected it in his name, placing upon the head the crucifixional nails of Christ, in the semblance of the rays of the Sun that shines over the citizens». Patria of Constantinople, vol.B, 174, 45. According to Constantine Rhodios, the statue was gold-plated, with "gleaming gold". Verses by Constantine Asekretes the Rhodian, p.69.

Translation by K. N.