



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium by J. Herrin

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FUCHS (M.) *In hoc etiam genere Graeciae nihil cedamus. Studien zur Romanisierung der späthellenistischen Kunst im 1. Jh. v. Chr.* Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1999. Pp. x + 98, ill. 3805325193. DM 98.

For many decades it was a source of profound anxiety for those studying Roman art that Greek art had never come to an end: Rome seemed to lack an artistic character of its own, and attempts to identify its distinctive essence were ultimately unsuccessful. More recent studies, however, have embraced the difficulties, endeavouring not to validate 'Roman art' but to analyse the subtle transformations by which Hellenistic artistic production came to cater for Rome's needs in the new context of Roman dominion.

Fuchs's adaptation of her 1995/6 *Habilitationschrift* focuses on the period of greatest interest in this long process of acculturation – the first century BC – when Romans' responses to the Hellenic works that filled their world were increasingly informed by the sense of a 'visual language' (cf. T. Hölscher's 'Bildsprache'), and their artistic requirements were being met by a repetitive repertoire of 'copies' of earlier works as well as new, classicizing or archaizing creations.

F. surveys in detail a number of classicistic and archaistic sculptures taken to represent some of the demands of a Roman clientele in the earlier first century BC, before turning to later and larger topics including: questions about the varieties of imitation and Roman taste for the styles of the past; the evidence for the eclectic classicizer Pasiteles and his 'school'; the fascinating mid-first-century(?) BC terracottas recovered on the Palatine in the 1980s; and interpretation of the art-theoretical and art-critical background for the activities of artists like Pasiteles and their patrons.

Through much of the discussion the author engages in very precise stylistic analysis and comparison (which is fairly well supported by excellent illustrations). She steps judiciously through the wreckage of years of art-historical speculation and wishful thinking, but this method of effective connoisseurship itself presents conclusions that may appear subjective or insubstantial. This is illustrated, for example, by the discussion of late Hellenistic, archaistic works which include (it is argued) the bronze Piraeus Kouros and Apollo Piombino, and the marble Strangford Apollo. Her dating of these and other sculptures is frequently convincing. The Apollo Piombino has long been considered a late Hellenistic forgery (the sculp-

tors' fragmentary names found on a lead tablet within it are hard to explain otherwise). The re-dating of the Piraeus Kouros is marginally more alarming, though the discrepancies between this and known late Archaic works, and the apparent stylistic similarities even with portraits from the early first century BC are suggestive. But the attempt (after Trillmich) to dislodge the Strangford Apollo from the Archaic corpus, appealing though it is, will still find few adherents, because the search for parallels in the proportions and rendering of the body, face and hair turns up genuinely Archaic relatives as well as late works like the 'Pisoni Kouros'. Besides the rather arbitrary character of some such comparisons, the relatively small number of secure, extant, late Archaic males must limit the degree of confidence that can be placed in the more subtle of stylistic analogies and discrepancies.

At the same time this book has much to offer. It provides a relatively up-to-date and authoritative overview and reassessment of important archaeological and literary material, and a critique of numerous other studies. It includes a most useful synthesis of sources and discussions on specific areas such as ancient forgery (the treatment of this topic in ch.4 is probably the most comprehensive available). The assessment of Pasiteles' work not merely as the accurate but eclectic reproduction of classical models, but as a theoretically informed manipulation of an artistic language, will contribute to debates about the (changing) character of the copying industry in the Roman period. It also places recent explanations of late Republican or Augustan art by Zanker and others in a fuller context. In its sensitive presentation of a wealth of poorly appreciated artistic and literary evidence, F.'s book is a valuable contribution to the study of the Graeco-Roman tradition.

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HERRIN (J.) *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001. Pp. xi + 304, 9 colour plates, 4 maps, table. 0297643347. £20.

In her previous books Judith Herrin succeeded in making the mediaeval world, East and West, accessible to a broad readership. Both *The Formation of Christendom* (1987), recently reprinted (2001), and *A Medieval Miscellany*

(1999) offered a window on the Middle Ages to non-specialists. *Women in Purple* is no exception to this pattern. In it H. has attempted to bring to life three Byzantine empresses from the eighth and ninth centuries – Irene, Euphrosyne and Theodora – in a scholarly style that makes the political intrigues of Byzantine Iconoclasm understandable to lay readers. She has organized the book into four chapters: ‘Constantinople and the world of Byzantium’, ‘Irene: the unknown empress from Athens’, ‘Euphrosyne: a princess born in the purple’, and ‘Theodora: the Paphlagonian bride’. A short conclusion, a section of footnotes – which includes bibliographical essays on all four chapters – and a thorough English index round off the book.

In ch.1 H. sets about explaining some of the more idiosyncratic elements of early Byzantium: court ceremonial, eunuchs (‘the third sex’), provincial organization and Iconoclasm all make their appearance. The topics are treated summarily and break no new ground; this chapter serves to set the stage for the biographies to follow.

Ch.2, on Irene, begins by evoking the young girl’s arrival in 769 at Constantinople, where she was married to the emperor Leo IV and crowned empress (51–64): ‘For Irene, it must have been extraordinarily exciting’ (51). H. narrates well Irene’s entry into Iconoclast politics, emphasizing the difficulties of ideological shifts against the backdrop of a diminishing empire. Irene’s restoration of icons in 787 at Nicaea, for which she gained fame among later hagiographers, is subordinate in H.’s view to her successes in foreign policy (113–16) and her patronage of building in Constantinople (102–7). Her political savvy and bold use of force against her son Constantine VI, whom she blinded (99), created a ‘vital precedent’ for the empresses to come (129).

Of this trio Euphrosyne has received the least attention in scholarship, and understandably so, given the scarcity of sources for her reign. H. acknowledges this dearth but thinks that ‘an attempt to restore some sense of her biography’ is necessary for a complete picture of the empire during this period (275). Euphrosyne was raised to the purple because the emperor, the usurper Michael II of Amorion, wanted to connect himself through her to the so-called ‘Syrian’ dynasty: thus, ‘her genes were her fortune’ (155). For H., Euphrosyne’s success as an empress lies more in her familial pride (159–61) – and as a genetic link between the two icon restorers – than in her political sensibilities.

In the fourth and final chapter, Theodora, the empress who restored icons once and for all, receives H.’s highest praise: she was a country girl from Paphlagonian pig farms ‘whose family acquired fame and fortune through her beauty’ (185) yet who triumphed over Iconoclasm through superior political skill. H. comments, ‘I think we can see Theodora doing something quite original here’ (204). H.’s acceptance of the theory that Theodora’s son Michael III, and not Basil I, was the father of Leo VI ‘the Wise’ grants Theodora all the more credit as the great-grandmother of Constantine VII *Porphyrogennetos* and therefore as the great-great-grandmother of her namesake, the eleventh-century empress Theodora (237–8). Although H. suggests that the reversal of Iconoclasm in 843 was not as important at the time as historians like to think (210), she nevertheless calls Theodora’s reign ‘a remarkable achievement’ (239).

H.’s agenda is hard to miss. She proposes that these three iconophile empresses saved the empire and are responsible for the best things to come out of the Byzantine ‘Dark Ages’, not least of which was, according to H., the so-called ‘triumph of Orthodoxy’. Her stated goal, albeit in the conclusion, is to show that ‘Once they have the chance to exercise power in their own name... women are just as purposive and effective as men’ (240). H. is here arguing against both the ‘misogynist’ chroniclers, who have preserved almost all we know about these women, and modern historians, who have uncritically accepted their testimony (259).

H. does not, as one might have hoped, wrestle with the intensely theological side of Iconoclasm, which has yet to receive a definitive treatment in English. Nevertheless, this book is a good introduction to the period, sexual politics aside. The lack of a bibliography will detract from its use among specialists, but lay readers will find the arrangement of the narrative accessible and a helpful guide to a difficult subject.

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