

3. SURVIVAL. 4th to 14th Century

Demon

Reception of ancient statues of Venus in post-ancient Europe was forever negatively affected by their explicit and uncompromising refusal after the onset of Christianity, when the statues of Venus became not only the antithesis and offence to the new faith but new morals as well. To Eusebius of Caesarea, the statue of Aphrodite on Golgotha is the antithesis of the Christian cross, the symbol of Christ's crucifixion, death and resurrection. In the "Life of Constantine" from 337-340, Eusebius writes about how the pagans intended to erase the memory of Christ's tomb by covering it up. *Above the ground they constructed a terrible and truly genuine tomb, one for souls, for dead idols, and built a gloomy sanctuary to the impure demon of Aphrodite; then they offered foul sacrifices there upon defiled and polluted altars.*¹ According to Eusebius, Aphrodite was not only a goddess of the pagans, but the embodiment of their immorality and moral depravity – the opposite of everything that the sign of the cross brought with it. The fact that the sculpture of Aphrodite appears in symbolic topography of the most holy place in the Christian world, Golgotha in Jerusalem, is also no coincidence.² At the time of Jesus's crucifixion, Golgotha was not yet a part of Jerusalem; it became one after the construction of the third system of Jerusalem's walls during Herod Agrippa's reign (41-44). Areas beyond the walls of ancient cities were traditionally the place where the dead were buried and also where Aphrodite was venerated, emphasizing her privileged link to fertility and natural life-giving powers.

As we have shown in the previous chapter, the depiction of Venus already in Imperial Rome became an important part of funereal symbolism, in which her sexuality pointed not only to fertility, but a renewal of life and thus a post-mortal life as well. According to Christian authors, the pagans had attempted to replace Christ's tomb, a symbol of the true eternal life in Christ, with a false promise of eternal life that was to be emphasized by a statue of Aphrodite. Eusebius's symbolism of Golgotha around 400 was elaborated upon by Saint Jerome – the statue of Venus erected on the site of Jesus Christ's crucifixion in this version became a memorial to the death of the Son of God as it replaced the Virgin Mary mourning his departure.³ Saint Jerome indicated this in a manner similar to Eusebius, as his description of the course of events of history begins with Jesus. In Bethlehem, on the site where the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus, Venus and the pagans mourned the death of her lover Adonis. However, this god of vegetation, whose death and rebirth were worshiped by the pagans, was only a false deity. The antithesis of the cross, the symbol of Christ's crucifixion and the statue of Venus also appear in the biography of Saint Porphyrius. In 402, the saint walked at the head of Christian processions carrying the cross to Gaza

¹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.26.3. English translation A. Cameron and S. G. Hill.

² Cf., for example, Wendy Pullan, "Regeneration and the Legacy of Venus: Towards an Interpretation of Memory at Early Christian Golgotha," in *Memory & Oblivion*, eds. Wessel Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999), 595-601.

³ St Jerome, *Epistula ad Paulinum*, 58.3.

and confronted a statue of Aphrodite there. This is described in detail by the saint's biographer, who was a witness to this event.⁴

Christian authors vehemently criticized the veneration of Venus not only as pagan idolatry, but also because of the depiction of the naked female body, which aroused sexual desires. Visual arts and primarily the statue of Venus were presented as the craftiest obstruction that the devil had ever placed before Christians, who were striving to save their souls by suppressing bodily yearnings. An extreme stance was taken by Tertullian, who claimed that statues depicting the naked body must lead to sin, as a person cannot resist their erotic attractiveness. According to this founder of Western theology, the sight of the statue led not only to adultery, but eventually even to murder.⁵ This was not only about the statues' erotic attractiveness; their existence alone was mortally dangerous. A person has an inherent tendency to worship idols, a fact which the devil utilized by bringing artists into the world and creating art. Each statue and each image is a potential idol and thus the seat of the demon, and therefore it is necessary to forbid any depictions. Byzantine anecdotes about ancient statues often repeat a warning against destroying or removing them, which would lead to catastrophe. The reason they were sometimes left where they were may have been the fear of the demons that hid inside them.

Tertullian and other early Christian theologians produced a new and highly effective argument against depictions – they were the potential residence of a demon that otherwise had no name or body. The demon found both of these in the statue, which people themselves activated through their worship.⁶ Venerated statues were portals to darkness, which unsuspecting people were opening and by doing so bringing doom upon themselves. For example, a story about an event that allegedly took place in the 5th century in the baths of Carthage tells of this. An unaware female visitor saw the statue of the naked Venus and imitated its pose.⁷ The Carthaginian girl was connected with the statue through her pose, allowing the evil force that had settled in it to enter her. Fortunately, it was quickly repelled and the statue was destroyed. The story of the unfortunate Carthaginian girl proves that statues of Venus in the 5th century were still a part of public space and were understood as they were in pagan antiquity, i.e. as models of female stances that were worth following.

Tertullian's contemporary, Clemens of Alexandria, made the statue of Aphrodite into the primary topic of his propagandist work "Exhortation to the Greeks."⁸ In his view, statues of this goddess represent the most dangerous threat: *if one sees a woman represented naked, he understands it is "golden" Aphrodite. So the well-known Pygmalion of Cyprus fell in love with an ivory statue; it was of Aphrodite and was naked. The man of Cyprus is captivated by its shapeliness and embraces the statue ... There was also an Aphrodite in Cnidus, made of marble and beautiful. Another man fell in love with*

⁴ Marcus Diaconus, *Vita S. Porphyrii*, 59-61.

⁵ Tertullianus, *De pudicitia*, 5. Cf. Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 108-123.

⁶ Tertullianus, *De idolatria*, 15.

⁷ See, for example, Lea Stirling, "Patrons, Viewers, and Statues in Late Antique Baths," in *Patrons and Viewers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Stine Birk and Birte Poulsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012), 67-81.

⁸ Cf. Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church Amid the Spaces of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 272-295.

*this and has intercourse with the marble, as Poseidippus relates. The account of the first author is in his book on Cyprus; that of the second in his book on Cnidus. Such strength had art to beguile that it became for amorous men a guide to the pit of destruction.*⁹ By attacking statues of Aphrodite, Clemens was condemning not only pagan religion and the worship of statues, but also the immorality of Roman society. Statues are human creations, but nonetheless they lead people to consider the depicted gods as true deities and see their immorality as morality inspired by the real god. The form of statues itself is immoral, which is proved by Aphrodite, who is depicted naked.

Statues of deities are merely things created by specific people under generally known circumstances that are in no way sublime, as Clemens emphasizes. Praxiteles created a semblance of Aphrodite in Cnidus according to his lover Kratina; painters painted Aphrodite according to the prostitute Phryne, and thus venerating the statue of Aphrodite is the same as venerating a prostitute.¹⁰ According to Clemens of Alexandria, the viewer was not seduced by Aphrodite, but by the semblance of a naked woman that the sculptor had created. After the onset of Christianity, ancient statues were therefore destroyed or deformed. By doing so, they were ritually cleansed of their demonic powers, a fact which is revealed in the destruction of the eyes, nose and mouth so the statue could not see, smell or talk. The heads, arms and legs were cut off of the statues. The penis was removed from male statues while the breasts and vulva were chiseled off sculptures of Aphrodite. Finally, they were deposited headfirst into the ground, weighed down, and then buried.¹¹

Work of art

Statues of Olympian gods continued to be made in the 4th century, but their production begins to drop steeply in the following century.¹² Faith in Venus was evidently very strong and in some communities continued on for centuries after the onset of Christianity. From as late as the mid-6th century, we have proof of the fact that the statue of Aphrodite was perceived as a manifestation of the goddess herself. Damascius, the last promoter of Neoplatonism who died in the 6th century wrote that he was overcome by a paralyzingly devout reverence when he saw a statue of Aphrodite in Athens: *Upon seeing it, I fell into a sweat through the influence of divine terror and astonishment and my soul was filled with such joy that I was quite unable to go back home. I went away several times only to return to that sight again. The sculptor has blended into it so much beauty - nothing sweet or sensual, but something dignified and virile: armed and as*

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrecticus*, 4.57.2-3. English translation G.W. Butterwoth.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrecticus*, 4.53. 5-6. Cf. Helen Morales, "Fantasising Phryne: The Psychology and Ethics of Ekphrasis," *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 57 (2011): 71-104.

¹¹ Cf., for example, Rachel Meredith Kousser, *The Afterlives of Greek Sculpture. Interaction, Transformation, and Destruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Troels Myrup Kristensen, "Statues," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology*, ed David K. Pettegrew et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 333-350; Rachel Meredith Kousser, "Mutilating Goddesses: Aphrodite in Late Antique Aphrodisias," in *Prähistorische und antike Göttinnen*, ed. Julia Katharina Koch et al., (Münster: Waxmann, 2020), 147-162.

¹² Cf., for example, Roland R. R. Smith and Bryan Ward-Perkins, eds., *The Last Statues of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

*if just returning from a victory, with an expression of joy.*¹³ However, the quickly thinning ranks of worshippers of the Olympian religion definitely died out in the 7th century in the Byzantine Empire.

The fact that the tradition of Greco-Roman artistic culture continued on after the onset of Christianity is one of the most interesting aspects of the development of world art.¹⁴ Archeological digs and written sources have given proof of differing and variously motivated attitudes towards ancient sculptures in the Christian eastern Mediterranean. There is, however, no doubt about dominant tendencies and chronological developments. Pagan statues were largely destroyed; nonetheless, these statues may have also been understood as a part of cultural heritage, the preservation of which heightened the prestige of the city and the whole state. This applies primarily to Constantinople, which was founded in 330. For this reason, statues of ancient deities from around the whole eastern Mediterranean were imported to this city without a past to become a part of the image of the new Rome. Statues of Aphrodite and other Olympian deities survived the rise of Christianity's power for the very same reason that they evoked Christian hatred, i.e. their close connection to the ancient Roman Empire.

In 399, an imperial decree ordered to have pagan statues torn down, but their destruction was not allowed if it endangered public property. *No man by the benefit of Our sanctions shall attempt to destroy temples which are empty of illicit things [i.e. altars and statues]. For We decree that the condition of the buildings shall remain unimpaired; but if any person should be apprehended while performing a sacrifice, he shall be punished according to the laws. Idols shall be taken down under the direction of the office staff after an investigation has been held, since it is evident that even now the worship of a vain superstition is being paid to idols.*¹⁵ Concerning this passage, it is important to mention that demolition could take place only after thorough investigation proving that the statue was indeed the subject of religious worship. Imperial decrees from the time around 400 clearly show that differentiations were made between the content and function of pagan statues.¹⁶

The extraction of these statues from the ideological framework in which they were created and originally served is explicitly formulated in the imperial decree from 407. The decree states that forbidden pagan rituals were still taking place and therefore orders the following: *If any images stand even now in the temples and shrines, and if they have received, or do now receive, the worship of the pagans anywhere, they shall be torn from their foundations.*¹⁷ The decree did not target pagan sculptures as such, but rather their worship; on the contrary, they were under imperial protection just like pieces in today's museum exhibits. Clear proof of this is found in a decree from 382, which

¹³ Damascius 63A. English translation P. Athanassiadi. Cf. Damascius, *The Philosophical History*, ed. by Polymnia Athanassiadi (Athens: Apamea, 1999), 170-173.

¹⁴ Cf., for example, Norberto Grammatici, *Mirabilia: Das Nachleben antiker Statuen vor der Renaissance* (Mainz Von Zabern, 1996); Anthony Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon. Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan, *The Archaeology of Late Antique Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

¹⁵ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.10.18. English translation C. Pharr.

¹⁶ See Lea M. Stirling, *The Learned Collector: Mythological Statuettes and Classical Taste in Late Antique Gaul* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 158-163.

¹⁷ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.10.19. English translation C. Pharr.

dealt with Edessa: *We decree that the temple shall continually be open that was formerly dedicated to the assemblages of throngs of people and now also is for the common use of the people and in which images are reported to have been placed which must be measured by the value of their art rather than by divinity.*¹⁸ These formulations, which unambiguously differentiated religious, historical and aesthetic function, were given enormous and lasting publicity. In 438, the imperial decrees were incorporated into Theodosius's codex, which was required reading for lawyers in medieval Europe. This had a fundamental significance for the reception of statues of Aphrodite in post-ancient Christian Europe.

In Byzantine Constantinople, a whole score of ancient statues of Aphrodite was exhibited in high-profile sites around the city center.¹⁹ The largest collection of ancient statues was located in the Augustaion and on the square next it, and among them were also statues of Aphrodite.²⁰ An exalted description of three statues of Aphrodite exhibited in the famed Zeuxippos baths, which were in the center of Constantinople, is dated roughly to 500. Judging by the description, the first Aphrodite was of the same type as the Venus de Milo. With the next two, one of which was naked and made out of gilded bronze, the writer had no problem recognizing their attribute – on their necks they wore a cestus, the magic belt of love.²¹ In the Forum of Constantine, there were also two statues of Aphrodite; one stood coupled with Artemis until at least the 8th century.²² The second was made of bronze and was probably naked, because she was a part of the group depicting the Judgment of Paris. The statue stood here until 1204, when the crusaders had it melted down.²³ Statues of pagan deities had their respective collectors among the Christian political elite, who used references to the luxury, elegance and sophistication of ancient Greece and Rome for their own self-representation.

In the 5th century, when ancient temples were being dissolved on a large scale, those with money could acquire a great amount of exceptional ancient statues cheaply and use them to decorate their private residences. The most famous collection was owned by Lausus, a dignitary in the court of Theodosius II; however, the collection in the portico on the main avenue of the Forum of Constantine was destroyed by a fire in 475. Famous statues in the collection included: *The Cnidian Aphrodite of white stone, naked, shielding with her hand only her pudenda, a work of Praxiteles of Knidos.*²⁴ This statue was not necessarily an original created by Praxiteles. In late antiquity, there is proof of a whole score of places where statues considered to be originals by Praxiteles were

¹⁸ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.10.8. English translation C. Pharr.

¹⁹ See Alessandra Bravi, "Ornamenta, Monumenta, Exempla: Greek Images of Gods in the Public Spaces of Constantinople," in *Divine Images and Human Imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Joannis Mylanopoulos (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 289-301; Lea M. Stirling, "Collections, Canons, and Context in Late Antiquity: The Afterlife of Greek Masterpieces in Late Antiquity," in *Using Images in Late Antiquity*, ed. Stine Brink (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 96-114, 101-105.

²⁰ See Sarah Bassett, *The Urban Image of Late Constantinople* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 139-249, cat.no. 7.

²¹ See Bassett, *The Urban Image*, cat.no. 38, 39, 40.

²² See Bassett, *The Urban Image*, cat.no. 106.

²³ See Bassett, *The Urban Image*, cat. 113.

²⁴ See Georgius Kedrenos, *Compendium historiarum*, 1, ed. Immanuel Bekker (Bonn: L. Weber, 1838), 564, English translation S. Bassett. Cf. Bassett, *The Urban Image*, cat. no. 113 and p. 98-120. Cf. Sarah Bassett, "Excellent Offerings: The Lausus Collection in Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (2000): 6-25.

exhibited.²⁵ The description of the Cnidia in Lausos's collection gives proof that Byzantine writers had adopted their approach to works of art from Greco-Roman antiquity. The Cnidia is characterized by whom the statue represented, what innovations it brought to the development of the depiction of Aphrodite, and which artist created it. However, we must not use our present understanding to interpret the concept of the time; in the Christian context, naming the author of a pagan statue may have been an argument for its condemnation as a mere work of the human hand.

The fact that the ruling class of the Christian Roman Empire tolerated pagan statues, which were by their very essence a contradiction to the new world view, was naturally a problem for Christian theologians. Eusebius from Caesarea had already solved this problem before 340 by writing that Constantine had left ancient statues in Constantinople *for the laughter and amusement of the spectators*.²⁶ Similarly, Constantine of Rhodes also defended the existence of pagan deities in Constantinople in the 10th century, which also proves that they were still an unmistakable part of public space in the Byzantine capital.²⁷ As they had been taken out of their original historical context, all kinds of fantastic legends were told about them. These are recorded in "Parastaseis" (Brief Historical Expositions), a guide to the city's attractions from the mid-8th century, which was subsequently incorporated into the more extensive "Patria" (Traditions of Constantinople) at the end of the 10th century.²⁸ Evidence of Lausos's collection from the 5th century mentioned above also comes from the 11th to 12th century, when ancient statues were understood as an important part of Byzantine cultural heritage.

At the time when Constantinople was conquered by crusaders in 1204, ancient statues of Olympian gods were a part of the identity of the city, and therefore their destruction by the occupying forces was not only motivated by Christian zealotry, but was also a tool that served to demoralize the conquered city. Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates sharply criticizes the crusaders: *These barbarians, haters of the beautiful, did not allow statues standing in the Hippodrome and other marvelous works of art to escape destruction ... rare and excellent works of art everywhere were given over to total destruction*.²⁹ The fact that the statues destroyed by the crusaders depicted naked ancient deities did not evidently bother Byzantine intellectuals. However, we may only speculate on how they viewed them. In Aphrodite's case, we can assume that erotic attraction was perceived as her primary message, similarly as in ancient Rome. Allegedly, a statue of Aphrodite stood on a column before Constantinople's brothel.³⁰ However, the naked Aphrodite may have also been perceived as the patroness of

²⁵ See Stirling, *Collections*, 100.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.54. See Cyril Mango, "Antique Statuary and Byzantine Beholder," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 57.

²⁷ Cf. Glanville Downey, "Constantine the Rhodian: His Life and Writings," *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honour of A. M. Friend, Jr.*, ed. Kurt Weitzman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 214-221.

²⁸ See Theodor Preger, ed., *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanum*, I-II (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1901-1907), 1-18 (Patria), 19-73 (Parastaseis). Cf. Helen Saradi-Mendelovici, "The Antiquities in Constructing Byzantine Identity: Literary Tradition versus Aesthetic Appreciation," *Hortus Artium Medievalium, International Research Center for Late Antiquity and Middle Ages* (Zagreb) 16 (2011): 209-227.

²⁹ Choniates, *Annals*, 650, 652, English translation H. J. Magoulias.

³⁰ See Bassett, *The Urban Image*, cat.no. 168.

fertility, which was the goal and meaning of marriage; her seashell may have also referenced the ritual of baptism with water, symbolic death and the promise of resurrection.



44. St. Nicholas orders the destruction of the statue of Venus, Byzantine mural, 1259.

The attitude towards statues of Aphrodite in the Byzantine Empire in the 13th century is evidenced by the wall painting depicting the destruction of the statue by St. Nicholas in the Boyana Church in Sofia, which differs from both Byzantine and Western depictions of the destruction of idols (44). The Byzantine painter depicted the saint by the statue on a column, which was a standard method used in Christian art to indicate a venerated pagan idol.³¹ The saint is instructing two young men on how to destroy the statue; the one on the left is raising an axe and the one on the right is pulling a rope tied around the statue's neck. The scene is highly uncommon in that it gives a detailed depiction of the ancient statue of Aphrodite, who is moreover portrayed in the pose of a martyr. Her upraised hands correspond to the manner in which the suffering Christ was depicted in the Italian art of the 13th century. Nancy P. Ševčenko concludes her analysis of this scene with a question: *Is it possible that this striking fresco reflects a recent reality, the pillage of antique statuary in Constantinople by the Crusaders?*³² The fact that St. Nicholas was never depicted destroying idols in Byzantine art can serve as an argument for this theory. We know of only several depictions of this topic, all of which originate in the Balkans, to where Constantinople's artists departed after their city was conquered.

The Boyana fresco painting is unique in that it depicts a specific sculptural type of Aphrodite despite the fact that the last monumental statues of the goddess were created a millennium before, at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century. The goddess on the Boyana fresco is wearing a type of Phrygian cap painted in gold; she is half-naked with her clothing wrapped around her waist. On the left side, the

³¹ Cf. Troels Myrup Kristensen, "Using and Abusing Images in Late Antiquity (and Beyond): Column Monuments as Topoi of Idolatry," in *Using Images in Late Antiquity*, ed. Stine Birket al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 268-282.

³² Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Life of St. Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Bari: Centro Studi Bizantini, 1983), 133.

clothing has fallen, and only the upper hem reaches just above her loins. Her contrapposto is emphasized, and thus her body is bent into an "S" shape. Her free leg is placed forward and is bent at the knee; her hip above the supporting leg is pointing out to the side. Her left arm is at ease, but is bent at the elbow and holds up a mirror. This is thus the ancient sculptural type of the Capuan Venus or Venus de Milo. Only in the depiction of the goddess's right hand did the painter deviate from this sculptural type; the goddess is lifting her hand upward and holding a scepter or spear. At the same time, the first documents of the reception of the ancient Venus image type also appear in the West, which is proven by the Eve carved around 1240 by sculptor Radovan into the portal of the Cathedral in Trogir, Croatia.³³ In Italy, an echo of this can be found in the Eve from the ciborium in Rome's Church of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, which was created by Arnolfo di Cambio around 1285.³⁴

Memory of Venus

Statues of Venus have never completely disappeared from cultural memory in Western Europe. The legend of the ball, ring and Venus was once one of the most popular medieval legends.³⁵ The oldest version is known from William of Malmesbury, who died sometime around 1143, in which Venus is explicitly portrayed as an evil demon. The story took place in Rome, and it was general knowledge that statues of the ancient deities could still be seen there.³⁶

A young Roman aristocrat, who has just been married, is playing a ball game outside the city with his friends. So as not to lose his wedding ring, he has placed it on the finger of a bronze statue of Venus which stands there. When he goes to pick up the ring, however, he finds that it will not budge, as the statue's fingers are now clenched. When he returns to the statue that same night, the fingers are once again straight, but the ring is gone. He returns to the bedroom to his wife, but when he lies down next to her, he stumbles upon an invisible being lying between them. The apparition then speaks to him: "*Lie with me, whom you have married today. I am Venus on whose finger you placed your ring, and I will not give it back.*"³⁷ The unfortunate young man turns to a certain Palumbus, a lost priest versed in necromancy. The priest arranges for the devil to force Venus to give him the ring, and so the young man gains back both the ring and his wife. The legend demonstrates the danger that the statue of Venus poses. The life of anyone who takes her power lightly can be destroyed. In the mid-13th century, this legend was retold by Vincent of Beauvais and placed it in Rome under the reign of Henry III.

³³ See Fritz Saxl, "Die Bibliothek Warburg und ihr Ziel" in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* (1921-1922): 3.

³⁴ Cf. Peter Seiler, "Schönheit und Scham, sinnliches Temperament und moralische Temperantia: Überlegungen zu einigen Antikenadaptionen in der spätmittelalterlichen Bildhauerei Italiens," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 70, no. 4 (2007): 473-512.

³⁵ Cf. for example, Berthold Hinz, *Aphrodite: Geschichte einer abendländischen Passion* (Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998), 116-123; Maurizio Bettini, *The Portrait of the Lover* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 131-134.

³⁶ Cf. Veronika Wiegartz, *Antike Bildwerke im Urteil mittelalterlichen Zeitgenossen* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2004).

³⁷ *De gestis Regum Anglorum libri quinque*, 2.205.1124-1125. English translation P. F. Baum.

After the mid-12th century, the legend of the ball, ring and Venus is also found in the German-speaking environment. This version accentuates the erotic attraction of Venus's statue, which is absent in the older version. During the rule of ancient Emperor Theodosius, there were two brothers in Rome who refused to be baptized.³⁸ During a game, their ball accidentally flew over the wall of the abandoned temple precinct of Venus. One of the young men named Astrolabius climbed over the wall and found a beautiful statue of Venus on the other side, which asked him to come to her. His love burned so strong for the statue that he put a ring on her finger as a sign of loyalty, an act which began his suffering. His friend requested help from the emperor's chaplain, who in turn forced the devil to reveal to him that the pagans who had created the statue had planted a magic plant next to her, which caused every person to fall in love with the statue. Therefore, they moved the statue immediately to Castle Sant' Angelo, where Pope Ignatius ritually cleansed it and dedicated it to St. Michael. Astrolabius and many more with him were then baptized. It is worthy to note that the statue caused harm as the result of black magic (i.e. a magic plant). Thanks to this fact, the statue did not need to be destroyed, but only "reprogrammed". When it was placed into the services of the archangel Michael, it began to function in the opposite manner.

In the legend of Venus and the ring in the French environment, the pagan goddess was replaced by the Virgin Mary. Young men were playing with a ball before the ruins of a church and one of them wanted to leave his ring on the statue of the Virgin Mary that stood there.³⁹ However, she was so beautiful that he professed his love to her, and confirmed this by placing the ring he received from his fiancée on her finger. As soon as he did so, the statue bent its finger, making it impossible to remove the ring. This scared the young man, but after a time he nonetheless married his fiancée. As soon as he lied down in his marital bedroom, he fell asleep and dreamed the Virgin Mary was lying next to him, reprimanding him for being unfaithful to her. Every time he awoke, however, he saw his wife lying next to him. The promise symbolized by the ring could not be broken with the Virgin Mary. Thus, the carefree young man was forced to uphold the promise and enter a monastery.

Another version of the legend of the ring comes from the mid-13th century, in which the connection between Venus and the Virgin Mary is even more greatly emphasized. In this legend, young men are playing with a ball in the Colosseum, where St. Gregory had gathered all the pagan statues of Rome. A newly married young man puts his ring on the finger of a statue so as not to lose it during the game. Once the game ends, however, the young man finds out that the statue's finger has bent and the ring cannot be removed. In addition, the statue appears at night in his marital bedroom between him and his wife and reproaches him for his infidelity. A curate is called in and the statue mocks him; thus, he realizes that the devil has overtaken the statue. Upon the recommendation of a wise hermit, the young man renounces his marital bedroom and, a year later, is rewarded for doing so as the Virgin Mary manifests herself to him. She asks him to make a statue of her that is as beautiful as the one that first enchanted him. At the time, the production of statues was

³⁸ *Kaiserchronik*, 2, 13102-13392, ca. 1150.

³⁹ See Paul Franklin Baum, "The Young Man Betrothed to a Statue," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 34, no. 4 (1919): 529-530.

forbidden, and thus the pope does not allow the young man's first request to do so. However, the dream repeats itself and the pope finally agrees. The young man makes a statue of the Virgin Mary, and a ring appears on her finger, a clear sign that the work has been successful. The young man is given back both the ring and his wife, and the pope orders for statues of the Virgin Mary to be made everywhere.⁴⁰ These legends are proof of three things. Firstly, statues of Venus have never disappeared from the European cultural horizon, even though only a small number of remains are left of the massive fund of monumental statues made from stone and metal that were collected on the territory of the ancient Roman Empire during previous millennia. Secondly, these legends are proof of the fact that Venus was irresistibly attractive but repulsive at the same time. Thirdly, the legend is proof of the fact that the statue of Venus can be used for good, and in this case as a model for depicting the Virgin Mary.⁴¹

Legend of the ball, ring and Venus is not the only proof that the pagan goddess played an important role in medieval imagery. In the 12th century Magister Gregorius of Oxford visited Rome, where he was captivated by the statue of Venus.⁴² Gregorius named Pope Gregory I (590-604) as the primary culprit of the destruction of ancient statues who, to his great delight, had failed to take notice of the statue of Venus. Gregorius approached the statue as a highly informed expert and, in his words, the goddess was depicted in the same manner as when she competed with Juno and Minerva in the Judgment of Paris. He explained the nakedness that was the primary attribute of the statue by claiming that Venus was the patroness of sexuality, and was therefore depicted undressing. Gregorius cites Paris's words on how Venus won over both goddesses, which was a paraphrase of Ovid's formulation.⁴³ The fact that the Oxford priest identified the statue is no surprise. In medieval Western Europe, the ancient myths were known from Ovid's "Metamorphoses," in which readers learned of Venus's birth from the sea foam, the golden apple that she won in the competition among three goddesses, the doves and swans that she harnessed to her chariot, and much more. In addition to ancient literary works, medieval writings summarizing the ancient myths were also a source on Venus.⁴⁴

Gregorius thoroughly strove to view the ancient statue from an ancient perspective. He may have taken inspiration from Pliny's "Natural History" not only for the praise of art imitating nature, but also for the potential erotic attractiveness of statues and his mention of Parian marble, as Pliny often mentions this white type of

⁴⁰ See Baum, *The Young Man*, 556-557.

⁴¹ Echoes of the legend can be found in Renaissance art, see Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 72.

⁴² Cf., for example, Wiegartz, *Antike Bildwerke*, 32-34; Dietrich Boschung, "Die Narratio de mirabilibus urbis Romae des Magister Gregorius: Die Ewige Stadt im Blick des gelehrten Romreisenden," in *Wunder Roms im Blick des Nordens*, ed. Christoph Stiegemann (Petersberg: Dr. M. Imhof, 2017), 76-89.

⁴³ Ovid, *Ars amatoria*, 1.248.

⁴⁴ Cf., for example, John Mulryan, "Venus, Cupid and the Italian mythographers," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 23 (1974), 31-41; Earl G. Schreiber, "Venus in the Medieval Mythographic Tradition," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 74 (1975): 519-535.

marble in connection with famous statues.⁴⁵ In addition to Pliny, Valerius Maximus, who wrote about Cnidia in a similar spirit, may have also served as a source for Gregory.⁴⁶ Gregory's enthusiasm for the statue of Venus was not necessarily the consequence of a personal experience, but rather a literary motif. In regard to the genre, the work is not so much a report from his travels as it is a praise of the city. An indication that the description of his encounter with a statue of Venus may have been literary fiction can be seen in the site where he allegedly saw it. He claimed it was in the Quirinal, next to the famous and gigantic group sculpture of Castor and Pollux reigning in their horses. We find no mention of a statue of Venus on this site in any other description of Rome. However, the veracity of Gregorius's story is unimportant; what is of consequence is the fact that it points to an awakened interest in ancient statues, moreover in a land as remote as England. In this respect, his testimony was nothing out of the ordinary. In the same period, i.e. around the mid-12th century, Henry, Bishop of Winchester (the brother of English King Stephen) bought ancient statues in Rome and had them taken to Winchester.⁴⁷

We have two documents regarding the reception of ancient statues of Venus from Italy in the second half of the 14th century. In the case of the statue of Venus found around 1340 in Siena, the attitude towards the statue first went through a phase of excited admiration. The excavated statue was festively exhibited in the fountain of the main square, but soon became the subject of sharp criticism and was removed.⁴⁸ Ghiberti, a native of Florence, wrote in 1416 about an event that took place sometime before 1348,⁴⁹ and is also mentioned in an even older record from a session of the Siena government, which decided on 7 November 1357 that the marble statue in the fountain had to be removed as it was indecent (*inhonestum videatur*).⁵⁰ Neither Ghiberti's report nor the clerical record make mention of the statue's sex, but the fact that it was a statue of the naked Venus rising from the sea is indicated by a note about a dolphin at the statue's feet. This also proves that it was definitely a marble statue, which needed to be supported by something at its base. The excited reaction of the city's inhabitants to discovering this statue had political overtones. Since the 12th century, Italian communes were dominated by local patriotism in regard to objects of antiquity, which was especially intense in places where the community could not pride itself on its ancient past, as it in fact had none. Siena was an Etruscan city which became a Roman colony during Augustus, but no ancient structures or statues were found on its territory. The random find of an ancient statue could draw attention to the connection

⁴⁵ See Dietrich Boschung, "Fragmentierung und Persistenz: Antike Statuen im Mittelalter," in *Persistenz und Rezeption: Weiterverwendung, Wiederverwendung und Neuinterpretation antiker Werke im Mittelalter*, eds. Dietrich Boschung and Susanne Wittekind (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2008), 347.

⁴⁶ Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, 11.11, ext. 3.

⁴⁷ See Jeffrey West, "A Taste for the Antique? Henry of Blois and the Arts," in *Anglo-Norman Studies XXX: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2007*, ed. Chris P. Lewis (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), 213-230.

⁴⁸ See Wiegartz, *Antike Bildwerke*, 195-201; Lynn Catterson, "Finding, Fixing, and Faking in Ghiberti's Third Commentarii," in *Inganno - The Art of Deception: Imitation, Reception, and Deceit in Early Modern Art*, eds. Sharon Gregory and Sally Anne Hickson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 123-149.

⁴⁹ See Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I Commentari*, ed. Ottavio Morisani (Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi 1947), 56. English translation: Elizabeth Basye Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art, 1: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 165-6.

⁵⁰ Anonym, "Una statua greca trovata in Siena nel sec. XIV." *Miscellanea storica senese*, 5 (1893): 175-176.

with the ancient Roman Empire, even when this involved a depiction of Venus as a naked woman, and therefore the statue was placed in the city's main fountain. The fact that statues of naked women (probably Venuses) could be placed in fountains in Italy is proven by an Italian book illustration from around 1370, which depicts a fountain in a private villa.⁵¹

We have no further information on the reasons leading to such a radical change in opinions on the nakedness of ancient statues in Siena and can only speculate on them. The statue of Venus likely became a part of a political struggle, and condemnation of the statue was either meant to draw attention away from the present situation in Siena's community or directly accuse those who had it installed in the fountain. Arguments of the opponents of the Venus statue show a generally widespread belief that admiration for it was in fundamental disagreement with the Christian faith. At the same time, however, it shows that a group of artists and experts existed in Siena around 1340 who were able to appreciate the value of the ancient artwork that had been unearthed and carefully analyze the circumstances surrounding its discovery. This is attested by a report stating that a pedestal was attached to the statue and contained the name of the statue's author, Lysippos. Ghiberti knew from Pliny's "Natural History" that this was the name of a famous ancient sculptor; the experts who were called to the site of the statue's discovery (and also recorded the name of its author) were likely to have known the same. The statue was allegedly drawn by Siena painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti and carefully deposited by a Carthusian monk, who showed it to Ghiberti. Justifiably, Ghiberti admired Lorenzetti as a pioneer of a new artistic style influenced by antiquity.

Proof of the intensity of interest in Venus among Italian intellectuals of the 14th century is found also in the testimony of Benvenuto da Imola, professor at the University of Bologna, a literary scientist who associated with Boccaccio and Petrarca. His text written in the 1370s describing his experience with an ancient statue of Venus is one of the first records of an art history analysis. Benvenuto incorporated his mention of the Venus statue into his commentary on Dante's Divine Comedy. In describing Purgatory, Dante writes of a stone wall that he approached: *To be marble white, and so adorned with sculptures, that not only Polycletus but nature's self, had there been put to shame.*⁵² Benvenuto ends his commentary on Dante's verses with a note on the ancient statue of Venus which he saw in a house in Florence.⁵³ It is also worth mentioning Benvenuto's evaluation of the statue's beauty and his antiquarian skill – he claims to have learned that the work was attributed to a famous sculptor from the classical epoch, Polykleitos. He does not agree with this, however, citing the fact that Polykleitos worked in bronze. He knew this from Pliny's "Natural History." From the same source, he drew information claiming that marble statues were made by

⁵¹ Boccaccio, Decameron, Paris, Bibl. Nat. MS ital. 482 (7260), fol. 4v. See Bernhard Degenhart and Annegrit Schmitt, *Corpus der Italienischen Zeichnungen 1300-1450: Süd und Mittelitalien* (Berlin: Mann, 1968), fig. 190 on p. 135.

⁵² Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Purgatorio, 10.31-33. English translation H. W. Longfellow.

⁵³ See Benvenuto da Imola, *Comentum super Dantis Aldigherij Comoediam*, 3. ed. William Warren Vernon and Giacomo Filippo Lacaita (Florence: G. Barbera, 1887), Canto X, 279-280. Cf. Wiegartz, *Antike Bildwerke*, 35-38; Seiler, *Schönheit und Scham*, 491-492.

Praxiteles, whose beautiful statue of Venus drew viewers from afar to view it in Cnidus.

Benvenuto did not determine the identity of the ancient statue that he saw in Florence based only on literature but also from his knowledge of ancient visual tradition. Neither Pliny nor Valerius Maximus, whom Benvenuto also knew, described the posture of Praxiteles' Cnidia.⁵⁴ The fact that she was covering her loins with one hand and had the other over her breasts is mentioned for the first time by Lucian in the 4th century, but Benvenuto could not have known this.⁵⁵ The fact that medieval Europe knew the visual type of Venus covering her loins with one hand and her breasts with the other is attested for instance by a drawing in the encyclopedia of Hrabanus Maurus, which was made after a 10th century model in 1023 in the Abbey of Montecassino, which at the time was an important center of the renewal of ancient grandeur.⁵⁶

Benvenuto writes of the Florentine statue of Venus exclusively as a work of art, making no mention whatsoever of its negative magical power, which played an important role in the history of the Siena statue. We cannot rule out the fact that Benvenuto fabricated the idea that the statue was attributed to Polykleitos only so he could refute the fact later. Perhaps he saw no statue of Aphrodite and merely created his antiquarian commentary in the form of a story about a personal experience to make a greater impression on readers. Nonetheless, it is likely that some private collection of ancient statues existed in Florence. A programmatic return to ancient artistic tradition began in this city at the end of the 14th century and could not have happened without the presence of authentic works of art. From 1391 to 1397, an echo of the statue of the naked Venus appeared in the sculptural decoration of the Florence Cathedral among the reliefs on the Porta della Mandorla, coincidentally the same type of statue seen by Benvenuto da Imola.⁵⁷

Renewed interest in antiquity was the result of the concurrence of many tendencies, including those political. In the 14th century, Francesco Petrarca and Giovanni Boccaccio built upon the work of Dante. Contrary to medieval scholastics, Petrarca placed emphasis on reason, but also on beauty, which he understood as the main tool to finding God, which became one of the primary attributes of Italian Renaissance culture. However, Giovanni Boccaccio had a much greater impact on the subsequent development of the visual arts and was the first to return to the ancient theory that the primary task of art is to imitate nature, by which he set the theoretical foundations for a depiction of the human body that would correspond to visual experience. Through this epochal act, Boccaccio rehabilitated ancient statues and called upon visual artists to follow this model and strive towards a faithful depiction of the naked body. His "Genealogy of the Pagan Gods" from 1371 (published in 1472) had a fundamental impact on the reception of ancient mythology in the visual arts.

⁵⁴ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 36.6; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, 8.11.11, ext. 3.

⁵⁵ Lucian, *Amores*, 13. See Irene Fantappiè, "Rewriting, Re-figuring: Pietro Aretino's Transformations of Classical Literature," in *Renaissance Rewritings*, eds. Helmut Pfeiffer, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 56-57.

⁵⁶ Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo*, 15, 6. MS. Montecassino, Archivio dell'Abbazia Cod. Casin. 132, p. 398.

⁵⁷ See Nikolaus Himmelmann, *Ideale Nacktheit* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 1985), fig. 27.

Until the mid-16th century, it remained the primary source of education on ancient mythology and also an inspiration to sculptors and painters.