CHRIST PANTOCRATOR: GOD, EMPEROR, AND PHILOSOPHER
THE BYZANTINE ICONOGRAPHY OF CHRIST

by

ANNA JOHNSON
(Under the Direction of Asen Kirin)

ABSTRACT

The development of Christ's iconography was vital to the success of Christianity, claiming the power of the ancient world's most venerated figures. This thesis explores scholarly arguments surrounding the origins of Christ's iconography, discussing the works of prominent scholars, including André Grabar's theory of the "Emperor Mystique" and Thomas Mathews' book *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* and their reviews, which respectively argue the Byzantine imperial and classical pagan bases of Christ's image. These works illustrate the complexity of the scholarly divide on this issue, which this thesis endeavors to bridge through an additional emphasis on a third major influence, referred to as "Christ the True Philosopher." Proposing the combination of these influences in each of Christ's characteristics and arguing that they should be considered as parts of a complex whole, this argument is illustrated through a sixth-century icon of Christ Pantocrator at St. Catherine's Monastery.

INDEX WORDS: Pantocrator, Byzantine, Iconography, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Emperor Mystique, True Philosopher

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ANNA JOHNSON

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ANNA JOHNSON

Major Professor: Asen Kirin
Committee: Shelley Zuraw
Mark Abbe

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education
and Dean of Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2023

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Introduction

The figure of Christ is perhaps one of the most widely recognizable in the world. By the sixth century CE, the strict iconography that is seen today had begun to take hold.[1] This iconography includes a mature, bearded figure with strong, dark features and long, peculiarly styled hair, frontally posed and wearing the Greek *himation* with a cross inscribed within his halo **(Figure 1)**. While the earliest images of Christ were more boyish, often beardless and with youthful bodies and short hair, this imagery evolved over time into the iconography of Christ as a mature, bearded man. This calculated shift, which took place over roughly five hundred years, was vital to the success of Christianity as one of the world's major religions, claiming the power of this era's most venerated figures for the mature iconography of Christ.

This thesis explores several scholarly arguments surrounding the origins of this iconography through a discussion of the works of prominent scholars, including André Grabar's theory of the "Emperor Mystique" as well as Thomas Mathews' book *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (1993) and its reviews, which respectively argue the Byzantine imperial and classical pagan bases of Christ's image, comparing Christ to Byzantine emperors and pagan deities. These works, and the controversy generated by them, are discussed at length because they illustrate the complexity of the scholarly divide on the issue of Christ's iconography, a divide that this thesis endeavors to bridge by way of an additional emphasis on a third major influence on the iconography of Christ, referred to as "Christ the True Philosopher," which points to the shared characteristics between Christ and ancient Greek philosophers. It is the

[1] J.M. Spieser, "The Representation of Christ in the Apses of Early Christian Churches," *Gesta* 37, no. 1 (1998): 63-66.

aim of this thesis to propose that these distinct influences are intertwined in each of Christ's characteristics and should be considered as parts of a complex whole.

Because of the vast scope of this topic, Christ's iconography is discussed with a focus on the icon of Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery, the earliest surviving example of its type **(Figure 1)**. This icon provides intriguing examples of the features of Christ that originated from pagan gods, Byzantine emperors, and typified philosopher images, though these features are, perhaps intentionally, nearly impossible to differentiate from one another. Dated to the sixth century CE, the Pantocrator resides in Egypt on Mt. Sinai and is one of the most striking icons of the Byzantine era. Multiple influences are clearly visible in his hair and beard, facial features and expression, clothing, and even the classical niche in the background. These influences create an image of Christ that suggests a hybrid god who wielded power through his association with the most revered figures of his time: deities, rulers, and intellectuals.[2]

This discussion unfolds in two parts, beginning by establishing the most prevalent theories as they are argued in existing scholarship, then illustrating how these theories are combined in Christ's iconography using the example of St. Catherine's icon of Christ Pantocrator.

Part One: Pagan Precedent and the Emperor Mystique

André Grabar and Thomas Mathews, both renowned art historians, are responsible for much of the scholarly discourse on the subject of the development of Christ's iconography. The controversy surrounding their theories pushed the field of art history to examine early Christian images through very different but extremely valuable lenses. These publications shepherded scholars from a comfortable resting point through intense controversy to land at a new resolution

[2] Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 27-28.

in which Christ's visual origins can be discussed anew, leaving behind the outdated belief that this iconography was largely reused from previous sources and not, at its core, a new and innovative representation of a god. Before this discussion can be expanded, the foundations that were formed out of this controversy, as well as the publications themselves, must be examined.

André Grabar's "Emperor Mystique"

The most prominent and widely accepted art historical understanding of the origins of Christ's iconography centered, for a number of years, around Roman influences. Early Christian art was considered through the lens of the work of internationally revered Byzantinist André Grabar, who credibly argued as early as 1954 that the art of Christianity evolved from Roman imperial standards.[3] Published in 1968, "Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins" laid out his belief that early Christians, in developing their religious art, adopted the common practice of borrowing previously established artistic traditions, selecting the formula used by the Roman Empire because it was already firmly established as a believable and powerful tradition of images in Roman-controlled, Christian-converting areas.[4] This development may have been largely motivated by efficiency; the population knew how to recognize major gods such as Jupiter, and they knew the artistic formula that denoted figures like Roman Consuls. Grabar argues that early Christians recognized that this knowledge could be applied to a new god without having to begin

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[3] André Grabar, "Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins," *The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts* 35, no. 10 (1969): 12-15, 30. The designation here of Roman imperial standards will be very important to this discussion of the origins of Christ's imagery. The imperial standards of religious images, political images, and even portraiture, set an example that rulers and the ruling body had significant power over who was depicted and how this was done. This was a very functional system that held considerable power over the control of a large and expanding empire, a system that the Byzantine Empire followed as closely as the pagan Roman empire that had created it.
[4] Grabar, "Christian Iconography," 37.

completely anew, invoking recognizable characteristics to promote the understanding of Christ as a major authority, as well as the apostles as important figures who acted under his command.[5]

When the Roman Empire became Christianized and an official Christian art form was needed, Grabar argues that the Christian Roman emperors sensibly relied upon and expanded this early Christian imagery which had both evolved from the Roman religious canon and developed within Roman society. Eventually, Christ took on the same visual type as the emperor, echoing the iconography of major Roman deities. Christianized Roman emperors portrayed themselves much the same as pagan Roman emperors, occupying the same spaces as the gods in classical niches and conforming to the same visual formula of strength and power, pulling Christ with them into a similar role not only as a god, but as a ruler.[6] Roman emperors asserted themselves as a type of ruling demigod descended from the pagan pantheon, placing themselves on a similar level as the gods by depicting themselves similarly. It was vitally important that the Roman ruler be associated with the gods, placing him above most mortals in an attempt to secure his power. That Christ was a major god like Jupiter had been established; that Christ and the emperor held similar stations became crucial to convey. Grabar called this phenomenon in which Christ became not only an imperial Roman figure but a Byzantine emperor "the Emperor Mystique."

The development of a visual connection between god and emperor was logical. Byzantinist Christopher Walter emphasizes that Christianity, like Jewish and Islamic religions, was and should have remained aniconic because of its strong aversion to the worship of idols. Indeed, God's second commandment to Moses was iconoclastic:

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[5] André Grabar, "God and the 'Family of Princes' Presided Over by the Byzantine Emperor," in *The Expansion of Orthodox Europe,* ed. Johnathan Shepherd (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1954), 66. Grabar's theory views Christ and Christian figures as edited standardized figures taken from a pagan imperial Roman society, with Christ, for example, as the Roman emperor and the apostles as versions of Roman consuls. This standardization created a set iconographic type for emerging Christian figures.

[6] Grabar, "God and the 'Family of Princes,'" 66.

> "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or a likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them." (Exodus 20:4) [7]

The early Christian disregard of this commandment, and the usage of imperial Roman imagery, can be attributed to the fact that the newly-emerged religion was in competition with pagan religions that functioned very much on the established basis of cultic imagery from which they drew most of their power; early Christians recognized that an invisible and faceless God was no match for gods that could be seen and touched.[8] They used the template set by Rome and understood by its people to present new religious figures, which, Walter states, eventually developed into its own template based in imagery that Roman viewers understood.

While the early roots of Christian imagery may have been in pagan deities, Grabar argues that it was more significantly based on the imperial standard, which influenced it more strongly; Christ and the apostles appear more like the emperor and his consuls in their icons than the greater and lesser gods, exemplifying a style of imagery that was very focused on the view of important figures frontally and from the chest up **(Figure 1, 2)**. While most statuary was full length, many statues of the Roman emperor and his ruling body were abbreviated into busts, which were viewed increasingly frontally and offered a more intimate, personal view of these figures that could be placed within private spaces more easily than full sized, public statues **(Figure 3, 4, 5, 6)**.[9] In this way, Grabar attributed the origins of Christian iconography most strongly to the traditions of the Roman Empire, considering Christ as an extension of the imagery of the Roman emperor, who

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[7] Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 79; *Holy Bible*, King James Version, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1769), Exodus 20:4. This commandment is the basis upon which iconoclasm justified the destruction of most icons as graven images of Christ.

[8] Christopher Walter, review of *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins*, by André Grabar, *Revue des études Byzantines* 28, 1970, 314-315.

[9] Ibid., 314-315.

was himself viewed as a god. At the time of Grabar's death in 1990, the Emperor Mystique remained the most widely accepted theory.

***Thomas Mathews'* The Clash of Gods**

In 1993, Thomas Mathews challenged Grabar's understanding of the iconography of Christ, and of early Christian art, with the publication of *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art,* in which he rejected the Emperor Mystique, arguing that Christ's characteristics came directly from pagan figures such as Orpheus, Serapis, and Zeus instead of from Roman imperial traditions.[10]

Throughout this book, Mathews energetically argues two main points: that early images of Christ never depicted him as an emperor or as a Roman imperial figure of any kind, and that the image of Christ instead developed from numerous religions, predominantly Greco-Roman paganism, to depict him as a god not dissimilar to Zeus.[11] Instead of an amendment to previous scholarship, Mathews chose to write a highly argumentative book that rejects, often in inflammatory terms, the work of most previous scholars on the matter. He suggests that Grabar's scholarship is imperialist and claims that the theory of the Emperor Mystique, and all those like it, serve a specific agenda of erasing the pagan religious origins of Christian figures, furthering ideals of imperialism.[12] Mathews argues that these ideas are based in Grabar's background in Czarist Russia, stating that "The need to interpret Christ as an Emperor tells us more about the historians involved than it does about Early Christian art."[13]

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[10] Antonie Wessels, *Europe, Was It Ever Really Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 30-35.
[11] Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 28.
[12] Ibid., 15-16. As Rome's empire grew, it increasingly began to Romanize its colonies, sending Roman citizens to live across its empire so that, instead of lands merely controlled by Rome, its people became Roman and were expected to live in the Roman way. This is akin to what Mathews means by claiming that scholarship that attributes early Christian imagery to imperial Roman imagery is imperialist, singularly imposing Roman imagery over what Mathews argues is a figure synthesized from several different religions.
[13] Ibid., 16.

Partially, the book seems to be an accusation of what Mathews believes is the lax scholarship of art historians like Grabar, as well as the medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz, and the archaeologist Andreas Alfoldi, to whom he credits the rise of the Emperor Mystique. *The Clash of Gods* proposes an entirely opposite "reinterpretation" of early Christian art which leaves no room for the valuable ideas of André Grabar and others. In much of the book, Mathews attempts to discredit Grabar's view of Christ as an imperial figure. According to Mathews, Christ does not look like an emperor at all; he does not wear the vestments of the emperor, depicted instead in an unembellished Greek *himation*. Mathews argues that if Christ were intended to be seen as an imperial figure he would have been dressed as such, specifically in fine clothing and with jewels or a crown. It is worth noting that Mathews omits the connection between the color purple, seen in Christ's garments, and the status of the emperor, who was typically the only one to wear the color because it was very expensive to make. While the lack of embellishment of Christ's clothing is still very different from imperial vestments, which were incredibly finely detailed and often heavily jeweled, what Mathews does not mention is that while Christ is clothed in a non-imperial garment, it is nonetheless purple, which carries imperial connotations.

While Mathews spends much of his time in *The Clash of Gods* disproving previously held ideas, he also proposes his own. Instead of an imperial basis, Mathews argues for a classical pagan one. Many early Christian images depict Christ as a young, beardless boy known as "Christ Emmanuel" or "The Good Shepherd." This boyish figure, Mathews states, has nothing to do with imperial imagery but is quite similar to young pagan gods like Hermes **(Figure 7, 8)**.[14] Some figures, such as a mosaic of Christ in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, even show a young Christ classically nude at his baptism with the long, curly hair of Dionysus and the soft, feminine body

[14] Ibid., 119-121.

of Apollo, a depiction never seen in the likenesses of emperors but one that is distinctly based in pagan representations **(Figure 9, 4, 10)**.[15] These boyish depictions of Christ are lacking of imperial qualities, as are, Mathews argues, even the later images of Christ as a strong, masculine adult. The long hair and beard of these later figures appear to be taken from the distinct features of major Greco-Roman gods such as Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto, including heavy brows, large eyes, mane-like hair, a full beard, and noticeably thick neck **(Figure 11)**. The frontal depiction of a god with strong, heavy features, as seen in the St. Catherine's Pantocrator, directly mimics how major pagan gods were shown as mature males. Even the large eyes of Christ, connected to the "imperial gaze" by the theory of the Emperor Mystique, are, according to Mathews, also taken from pagan imagery. Major gods were often shown with large, all-seeing eyes, an idea only later adopted by emperors in order to exert the illusion of god-like control over their subjects.

These "misinterpretations" of classical characteristics as imperial, Mathews argues throughout his book, hold true for most iconographic characteristics of Christ, which have been only mistakenly attributed to imperial iconography by theories like Grabar's Emperor Mystique.

Response to Mathews:* The Art of Empire *and Other Reviews

Reviews of Mathews' book reveal that it was considered massively controversial. Dale Kinney of Bryn Mawr College begin by scrutinizing Mathews himself. Kinney questions his ability to make an argument based strictly on facts, attributing his book, viewed partially as an attack on the historical sovereignty of Christ, to Mathews' personal religious past as a Catholic who joined the Jesuit order before breaking from the institutional Church entirely.[16] Kinney

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[15] Magdel Le Roux, "The Survival of the Greek Gods in Early Christianity," *Journal for Semitics* 16, no. 2 (2007): 491. Most emperors chose associations with major gods and depicted themselves as youthful but strong and definitively masculine.

[16] Dale Kinney, review of *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art,* by Thomas F. Mathews, *Studies in Iconography* 77, no. 3, 1994, 237-238.

suggests that Mathews should have acknowledged his potential prejudice in his book, providing an example by acknowledging her own in the beginning of the review:

> "Being myself an atheistic, lapsed Episcopalian, I must acknowledge that while I respect the validity of Mathews' enterprise, I cannot – for more than scholarly reasons – accept his work as a universally binding 'representation of early Christian art.'"[17]

Kinney goes on to suggest that Mathews' book is in fact more representative of the intentional historical blindness that he accuses other scholars of than any of the publications Mathews targets, stating that his "selection and suppression of evidence" is more exemplative of imperial ideals than "any work by Grabar."[18] Kinney gives several examples of an intentionally narrow presentation of evidence, including the exemption of the *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* from Mathews' discussion of Christ on a throne, which fails to discuss this well-known example of Christ on a *sella curulis,* an ancient seat of authority **(Figure 12, 12.1)**.[19] Kinney sums the book up as "a series of peculiarly personal responses to apparently personal questions," suggesting that the value of Mathews' contribution to the discussion is that it triggered any discussion at all.[20]

W. Eugene Kleinbauer of Indiana University calls the book "lucidly written, thoroughly documented, and copiously illustrated," largely praising Mathews' discussion and agreeing that Christ's image was predominantly shaped not by the image of the emperor, but by Greco-Roman representations of gods; for example, he attests that the garments and beard of Christ are indeed not imperial attributes.[21] Kleinbauer does, however, question some of Mathews' arguments. He

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[17] Ibid., 238.
[18] Ibid., 238-239.
[19] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 108; Kinney, review of *The Clash of Gods*, 239. Mathews argues that Christ is never depicted on a throne intended to label him as an imperial ruler, arguing instead that it is a divine, backless seat that Christ occupies. Kinney rightly inserts the *Sarcophagus* into the discussion as a clear example of Christ seated on a *sella curulis,* a seat reserved for government officials in ancient Rome **(Figure Junius Bassus 12.1)**. This clearly shows, as Grabar suggests, a basis of some components of Christ's imagery in imperial Roman standards.
[20] Kinney, review of *The Clash of Gods*, 240.
[21] W. Eugene Kleinbauer, review of *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, by Thomas F. Mathews, *Speculum* 70ey, no. 4, 1995, 937-939.

rejects Mathews' reading of anti-Arian messages within images of Christ's divinity, as well as stating that Mathews "conveniently did not pursue some questions as far as he might have," such as Kinney's example of the *Sarcophagus.*[22] Had he pushed the questions further, Kleinbauer believes that some of Mathews' conclusions may have been different. His review of *The Clash of Gods* labels it as relevant and important to the ongoing discussion of pagan influences on the image of Christ, but characterizes some of the arguments as "incomplete" and the overall tone of the book as "overly provocative," suggesting that Mathews' argumentative tone damages the perceived credibility of the book.[23] In a separate review, however, Peter Brown of Princeton University argues that this tone was necessary and intentionally employed by Mathews to trigger the outrage that the book successfully garnered, which produced an astounding number of reviews and reopened a conversation about the origins of Christ's image, which had, according to Brown, "dozed off into the comfortable embrace of received wisdom."[24]

The most substantial response to Mathews' book is a compilation of reviews organized into a comprehensive discussion, and often rejection, of each chapter of *The Clash of Gods*. Published by nine art historians, *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in its Imperial Context* (2015) is a collection of individual essays that reviewed Mathew's findings, reaffirming the Emperor Mystique by tracing the changes in Christ's iconography that took place over time, particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries following the Roman emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity.[25] These art historians concur that the earliest images of Christ were probably repurposed images of pagan

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[22] Ibid., 939.
[23] Ibid., 941.
[24] Peter Brown, review of *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art,* by Thomas F. Mathews*, The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3, 1995, 502.
[25] Daniel C. Cochran, review of *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context,* ed. Robin M. Jensen and Lee M. Jefferson, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9, no. 1, 2016, 287-289. This period was particularly important to the development of Christian art, which grew substantially after the religion was declared legal. That it was legal for Romans to be Christian triggered the evolution of simpler, more ambiguous images like those in the Catacombs into the Christian iconography seen in official images like Christ Pantocrator as early as the sixth century.

gods or mythological figures such as Orpheus, who was known before Christ as "The Good Shepherd."[26] However, they argue that as Christianity developed and images were made specifically to represent Christ, early pagan imagery gave way to the imperial iconography of Constantine and his successors, creating a basis for Christ as a divine ruler.[27]

The essays highlight the transition of Christ in early Christian art from "The Good Shepherd," a benevolent and ordinary figure, into the dominating figure that culminated in icons of Christ Pantocrator **(Figure 7, 1)**.[28] Similarities between these versions of Christ and images of Byzantine emperors range from facial structure to pose. What Mathews argues is the frontal pose of major Greco-Roman gods, *The Art of Empire* asserts is the influence of Roman imperial busts, and later the Emperor Justinian I, who, in 539 CE, was the first Byzantine emperor to adopt a completely frontal official portrait. Notably, this pose later became the imperial standard, as well as the iconographic standard of images of Christ.[29]

While *The Art of Empire* refutes Mathews' claims in many instances, such as co-author Jennifer Awes Freeman's statement that "a figure need not be gilded and gem-encrusted to carry connotations of power" in response to Mathews' sentiments about Christ's non-imperial dress, the book mainly suggests that the presence of Greco-Roman characteristics in Christian imagery is a byproduct of the intentional use of imperial characteristics. This resulted in an image of Christ that, while largely inspired by the iconography of Byzantine emperors, shows traces of paganism

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[26] Le Roux, "Greek Gods in Early Christianity," 483-485.
[27] Lee Jefferson, "Revisiting the Emperor Mystique: The *Traditio Legis* as an Anti-Imperial Image," in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context,* eds. Lee Jefferson and Robin Jensen, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 49-52.
[28] Ibid., 74-76.
[29] R. Howard Bloch, "Frontality: The Imperial Look from Christ the Pantocrator to Napoleon Bonaparte," *Modern Language Notes* 126, no. 4 (2011): 10-11.

because of the influence of these early traditions on imperial iconography, which is, Freeman claims, what Mathews cannot see beyond.[30]

***The 1999 Revision of Mathews'* The Clash of Gods**

Six years later, after the flurry of responses to and rejections of *The Clash of Gods*, Mathews published a revised version of the book. This 1999 edition includes an additional chapter on panel painting and encaustic icons titled "The Intimate Icon," in which an informative discussion can be found on St. Catherine's icon of Christ Pantocrator. The chapter focusses on the tradition of panel painting in Roman-controlled Egypt and on the development of Christian icons from these Egyptian panels.[31] Pagan and Christian icons are mostly made in identical fashions: thin wooden boards about a centimeter thick joined together with grooves, lightly gessoed, and painted with figures in encaustic or tempera. Mathews gives a specific example of Christian icons following the tradition of pagan ones with a close look at an icon of the Egyptian deities Isis and Suchos **(Figure 13)**. The image was thought to be the only icon with a set of grooves that allowed a lid to slide into place and cover the painting, but the work of renowned Byzantinist Kurt Weitzmann documented three early Christian icons with the same feature at St. Catherine's Monastery, suggesting that the icons were sometimes covered when not in use by way of exact

[30] Jennifer Awes Freeman, "The Good Shepherd and the Enthroned Ruler: A Reconsideration of Imperial Iconography in the Early Church," in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context,* eds. Lee Jefferson and Robin Jensen, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 160.

[31] Lee M. Jefferson, review of *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons*, by Thomas F. Mathews, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 26, no. 2, 2018, 338-340; Thomas F. Mathews and Norman E. Muller, *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Painting and Icons* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016), 63-68. A group of encaustic wax paintings, now known as the Fayum Mummy Portraits, are relevant to Mathews' discussion of Egyptian panel painting and its connections to early Christian art. Most of these paintings, placed upon mummified bodies, were for pagan religious practices, but they appear to have strongly influenced early Christian icon painting. These portraits are known for their intense realism and enlarged eyes, clearly echoed in St. Catherine's Pantocrator **(Figure 14, 1)**. The icon is notable in its striking realism; most Christian icons are stylized, but this icon uses realism to convey the living presence of Christ, just as the Fayum portraits conveyed that the subjects of the portraits lived on in the afterlife.

mechanism that Roman Egyptians used to do so, supporting that these pagan icons were the basis for early Christians' development of their own.[32]

Mathews claims that not only were the visual traditions of icons taken from Egyptian practices, and later Roman Egyptian practices as in the Fayum mummy portraits, but their particular way of being worshiped as well **(Figure 1, 14)**.[33] With icons, Christian worship came closest to paganism, with worshippers providing offerings to the images, kissing them, and behaving as if they were the holy figures themselves.[34] This would later lead to the belief that icons were idols, triggering their almost total destruction in the Byzantine iconoclastic period.

While Mathew's argument is, in some places such as the explanation of why Christian art echoes pagan art so definitively, convincing, the Emperor Mystique also remains credible. Mathews rejected many art historians' views on the development of Christ's iconography and these scholars in turn rejected most of his aggressively argued points. However, there is perhaps a middle ground in which scholarship can accept both theories as likely sources for early image of Christ, viewing images like icons of Christ Pantocrator as depictions in which characteristics of pagan gods and Byzantine emperors were combined into a new formula of deity depiction. Because of the influence of images of Roman pagan gods on early depictions of Christianized Byzantine emperors, it is clear that the iconography of Christ, which was influenced by the emperor, draws from both classical and imperial sources. Grabar's and Mathews' theories are often separated or treated as exclusive and incompatible, struggling for control of the idea of a pagan-based or imperial-based image of Christ. Both have substantial credibility, and there are gaps in each that can be filled by the other. Considering them in combination lends a more complete explanation of

[32] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 180-181. The St. Catherine's icons *Three Hebrews, The Ascension,* and *St. Plato and Companion* all feature a cover that functioned exactly like the sliding lid of *Isis and Suchos.*
[33] Ibid., 178.
[34] Ibid., 177.

many of the characteristics of Christ's iconography that cannot be explained if we are forced to look through one lens or the other.

Part Two: The Icon of Christ Pantocrator at St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai

The icon of Christ Pantocrator at St. Catherine's Monastery, the earliest surviving example of its type, is illustrative of how Grabar's and Mathews' theories can be seen to coexist within an image of Christ **(Figure 1)**. "Pantocrator," a Greek word meaning "ruler of the universe" is applied to icons of this particular composition because of their ability to represent Christ as both the human ruler of the mortal world and the divine ruler of the Heavenly realm, encompassing the universe in its entirety. St. Catherine's sixth-century icon is one of the most visually readable of these figures, depicting both a mortal, forgiving Christ and a divine, judging one blended within a single figure **(Figure 1, 15)**. The icon features Christ nearly frontally facing, turning slightly to the right as he holds a closed Gospel in his left hand and raises his right hand in a sign of blessing or forgiveness.[35] The asymmetrical shading of the face, which is much heavier on Christ's left, is understood to represent the blessing and judging sides of Christ in a single figure. This effectively invokes the idea of the Last Judgment, with his left side representing the judging Christ who holds a codex of the New Testament, his face darkened with a severely cocked eyebrow and his eye fixed on the viewer, and the right side representing the forgiving or blessing Christ with lightened face and relaxed mouth and eyebrow, the pupil of the right eye looking upward towards Heaven

[35] Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins, *Icons from Sinai* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 51-52. The fingers form the IC XC that represents the initials of Christ.

as he makes a blessing sign with his raised hand.[36] The direction of the eyes toward different points communicates Christ's focus on both the earthly world and on the divine afterlife, a reminder of his status as an intermediary between them.

The survival of this sixth-century icon is largely due to its geographic location at St. Catherine's, a fortified monastery which sits among the remote peaks of Mt. Sinai in Egypt.[37] This monastery houses the largest known collection of pre-iconoclastic early Christian art and icons in the world. The collection's sixth- and seventh-century icons are of particular importance to the study of early Christian art, including the development of the iconography of Christ, because they are among the few that remain; most early Christian images were lost to Byzantine iconoclasm. Of wood panel icons dating before the eighth century, only about three dozen survive worldwide, making images like St. Catherine's Pantocrator both incredibly rare and incredibly valuable.[38]

The icons of St. Catherine's were not studied in much detail until 1958, when George Forsyth and Kurt Weitzmann, two professors of art history from the University of Michigan and Princeton University respectively, organized an expedition and traveled to the remote monastery. Forsyth and Weitzmann led teams to St. Catherine's four times between 1958-1965 with the goal

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[36] Annemarie Weyl Carr, "Gospel Frontispieces from the Comnenian Period," *Gesta* 21, no. 1 (1982): 18. The book that Christ holds is an accurate representation of a contemporary New Testament. While few of these objects survive, the Metropolitan Museum's tenth- or eleventh-century CE frontispiece is similar to the one seen in St. Catherine's Pantocrator. The covers were typically made of gold, with precious stones and ivory inlaid, featuring a scene of Christ's life on the front and a cross on the back **(Figure 16)**; Manolis Chatzidakis, "An Encaustic Icon of Christ at Sinai," *The Art Bulletin* 49, no. 3 (1967): 197.

[37] Kurt Weitzmann and John Galey, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, the Icons I: From Sixth to Tenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 6-7. Geographic location, here, is emphasized because St. Catherine's possession of so many icons is understood to be due to its location, which was too remote even for iconoclastic doctrines to reach.

[38] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 179. Several wood panel icons from before the eighth century survive from Rome and Russia, along with roughly a dozen from the Nile regions. The rest reside at St. Catherine's Monastery. Most were destroyed during iconoclastic periods, however, encaustic painting is also fragile and subject to environmental damage, as are the wooden panels on which it is generally applied. These paintings are particularly susceptible to cracking and peeling as temperature and moisture changes and the wood and wax-based paint expand, contract, harden and soften. The result is that most surviving icons, already few in number, have large areas of damage, making wholly preserved icons even more rare.

of photographing every icon and composing a catalogue with information on each one, including their origins, styles, mediums, states of preservation, changes made throughout time, and original uses. They hoped to restore a part of the large gap in history beginning with the iconoclasm of the eighth century, during and after which most figurative religious art of the Byzantine Empire was destroyed. Much of Weitzmann's work focusses particularly on St. Catherine's collection of icons, placing the sixth-century Pantocrator at its head because of its subject, age, and fine material and artistic quality.[39]

Weitzmann dates the icon to around the time of the founding of the monastery itself towards the end of Emperor Justinian I's rule, between 548 and 565 CE, emphasizing its connection to the emperor as well as this Pantocrator's particularly imperial type. Pantocrator icons, in their ability to show several natures of Christ simultaneously, were connected to Emperor Justinian I's official Christology, which viewed Christ as both human and divine always and at once, not as wholly human before the crucifixion and wholly divine after.[40] Religious art created during the rule of Justinian I was often finely detailed and less stylized than the standard under previous emperors. The highly realistic representation of Christ during his reign, which depicts him as a living man, is distinctly suggestive of the emperor's desire to emphasize Christ's mortality, promoting relatability between the "Living God," as stated in Matthew 16:15, and the

[39] Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine,* 15. Weitzmann noted that the icon had been "restored" in the thirteenth century. This restoration changed the icon drastically. In addition to brightly colored drapery in saturated blue and repainted hair, the background of the icon was entirely painted over in a flat, dull green, erasing the niche-like structure and replacing the two stars in the upper corners with a red "IC" on the left and "XC" on the right to definitively label the image as Christ **(Figure 17)**. In addition, St. Catherine's Pantocrator was cut down on the sides, now measuring 84 centimeters by 45.5 centimeters, which accounts for the odd placement of the figure within the picture plane and the incomplete view of the shoulders; the original icon was probably closer to the composition of St. Catherine's icon of St. Peter, with a wider view that encompassed the shoulders more completely **(Figure 2)**. Christ appears cramped and the icon ends tangentially with the border and the halo at both the top and the left side, leaving more space on the right side where the border is cut along the spine of the Gospel book instead. While the cropping can never be undone, the thirteenth-century paint was stripped away in 1962, returning the icon to its original state.

[40] Ibid., 15; Cormack, *Byzantine Art,* 60. This does not hold true for all theologians, which is why it was necessary for the emperor, seen as an authority on the figure of Christ, to declare his official view on the subject.

emperor in the eyes of Byzantine worshippers.[41] St. Catherine's Pantocrator exemplifies Justinian I's promotion of Christ as a living figure; the lifelike style in which the icon was painted is notably different from most Byzantine figural images, which are typically heavily stylized **(Figure 1, 18)**. The Pantocrator is alive with fleshy, warm-toned skin, bright eyes that recede into his face and a long nose that protrudes. Through religious art that depicted Christ realistically, Justinian I's official concept of Christ as both wholly divine and wholly mortal supported the idea that the emperor was, like Christ, an all-seeing mortal representative of God among men **(Figure 1, 19)**.

St. Catherine's Pantocrator and Imperial Iconography

Because of the masterful quality of the painting, as well as the realism of its style, St. Catherine's icon is believed to have originated in a workshop in Constantinople, sent upon its completion to the monastery, which Justinian I funded in the name of the late Empress Theodora (500-548 CE).[42] The belief that Justinian I commissioned the Pantocrator is connected not only to its quality but also to this Christ's particular iconography, which adopts many of the features of the emperor including the frontal bust depiction, wide eyes, and purple *himation* **(Figure 1, 19.1)**. The same type of Pantocrator appeared before this one on the official silver cross of Emperor Justin II (520-578 CE), during Justinian I's reign on his gold solidi, and after its creation on the solidi of Justinian II (669-711 CE), which often depicted Christ Pantocrator on one side of the coin and the emperor on the other **(Figure 1, 20, 21)**.[43] Such coins were specifically minted for each ruler. Traditionally, Roman coins depicted the emperor in profile; Justinian I was the first emperor to adopt a fully frontal official image on the gold solidi of his reign **(Figure 22, 20)**. This switch to a completely frontal depiction and the subsequent abandonment of the profile view of those in power

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[41] *Holy Bible*, King James Version, Matthew 16:15, in which Christ is called "the Son" or "manifestation" of the "Living God."
[42] Cormack, *Byzantine Art,* 69-70.
[43] Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine*, 14.

is notably seen in most icons of Christ from this period onward, suggesting a strong connection between how Christ and the emperor were depicted **(Figure 1, 19)**.[44] The forceful frontality of St. Catherine's icon and the continual appearance of this type of Pantocrator on imperial items links it to imperial significance, supporting the idea that the emperor himself likely commissioned it.[45]

Religious works from Constantinople, like this Pantocrator, were held to the imperial standard and considered to be the finest pieces, meaning that St. Catherine's icon is likely representative of the perfect example of what the emperor wanted in an image of Christ, which was carefully considered because of its religious and political ramifications. The dual image seen in Pantocrator icons may have emerged in the Byzantine Empire because of a complicated division of power between Christ as almighty and the emperor as all-powerful. Subjects of the Christian empire needed to understand that, while God was the ultimate authority, the emperor was the authority on earth. The assertion of the emperor as God's chosen representative sought to remove a conflict between the emperor and the god that he promoted. This accomplishment rested on the association of one with the other, making the presumed patronage by Justinian I very likely and supporting André Grabar's Emperor Mystique. However, this association was more complicated than simply representing a Christian god and a Christian emperor as part of a single being; the combination of religious and political powers also included the necessary appearance of the old gods who had helped Roman rulers maintain control of an ever-expanding empire for so long.[46]

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[44] Bloch, "Frontality: The Imperial Look," 46-47.

[45] Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine*, 14. The icon is also single-sided and has no markings on the obverse side, which helped in its dating; according to Weitzmann this is typical of icons made before the eighth century, meaning the icon must be from the sixth or seventh.

[46] Eric R. Varner, "Maxentius, Constantine, and Hadrian: Images and the Expropriation of Imperial Identity," in *Using Images in Late Antiquity,* ed. Stine Burk (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 59. Depicting the first Christian emperor, the Colossus of Constantine, c. 312-315 CE, shows a figure reminiscent of major pagan gods like Zeus **(Figure 23, 11)**. While himself a converted Christian, Constantine the Great's close connection with the pagan pantheon was intentional, presenting a propagandistic association of himself with these gods, who had commanded great power for centuries, while spearheading the power of a new religion whose iconography had yet to be concretely developed.

The influence of Roman gods is also present in St. Catherine's Pantocrator, supporting Thomas Mathews' basis of the image of Christ in pagan deities through Greco-Roman traces that can be identified as clearly as imperial ones. The appearance of these pagan traces is likely rooted in the history of the Roman Empire; prior to the fourth century CE, Christianity kept a relatively low profile, first emerging as a small underground cult subject to persecution, later becoming more widely accepted, and eventually being practiced by the emperor, Constantine the Great, himself. Christians in the Roman Empire drew imagery from the Greco-Roman pantheon to depict the figure of Christ. Originally depicted as "The Good Shepherd," Christ slowly developed into a mature, bearded man, a figure that eventually overtook the long-surviving Roman religion with which he was at odds **(Figure 7, 1)**. It merits clarification that while the image of Christ, a new god, assumed many Roman characteristics, it assumed only their cultural familiarity and not their religious connotations. Any visual parallels between Christ and pagan gods were not meant to invoke the veneration of these specific gods, but rather served to mark Christ as a god using the recognizable imagery already established in the Roman world, bolstering this new figure by invoking powerful visual traditions of the past.

St. Catherine's Pantocrator and Pagan Iconography

The most prominent of these visual traditions that survives in the iconography of Christ is the "Jupiter type." Perhaps the most convincing argument in his assertion of a pagan-based image of Christ, Mathews draws firm visual connections between the sixth-century Pantocrator and the first- or second-century CE icon of Serapis at the Getty Museum **(Figure 1, 24)**. This Greco-Egyptian god boasts the most significant visual similarities of any god to images of Christ. Mathews points not only to the visual continuity between the two figures, which feature the same large eyes, severe face shapes and beards, though Christ's is shorter and well groomed, long dark

hair, thick necks, extremely similar vestments, and a frontally but slightly turned position, but also to their similar religious characteristics **(Figure 1, 24)**.[47] Both of these figures convey the likeness of Jupiter, following the "Jupiter type," which was intentionally taken on by the highest gods of both Egyptian and Christian religions because of the power it was understood to convey. Similarly to the way that Greco-Roman religious iconography was modified to suit Serapis, the god of the sun and ruler of the pantheon in Ptolemaic Egypt, icons of the Pantocrator type illustrate Christ in the tradition of Jupiter.[48] Jupiter's features, which were already associated with the most powerful gods of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, were sensibly adopted as the basis for the iconography of Christ as these images evolved from depictions of a young man to a powerful god.[49] The image of a God of gods, which Christ was likely intended to be in the struggle for religious dominance over older, more established religions, as well as Christ's status as "King of kings," asserted in Timothy 6:15 and Revelation 17:14, resembles the status of pagan gods like Jupiter as rulers of the pantheon, which was arraigned as a hierarchy from major to minor gods.

The root of Mathews' argument, illustrated most clearly in the comparison of Christ and Serapis as examples of the Jupiter type, is that Christ "stole the look of the gods with whom he was in competition."[50] Icons of Christ purposefully took on a familiar appearance with a meaning that was already understood, setting Christ head-to-head with deities like Jupiter and Serapis, the

[47] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 184. Both gods were believed to have been sacrificed for the sins of a larger population, then reborn after a period of three days into a higher, divine being; John Allen Giles, *Hebrew and Christian Records: An Historical Inquiry Concerning the Age and Authorship of the Old and New Testaments* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 1877) 86. The Ptolemaic Egyptian god was sometimes referred to as "Serapis Chrestus," or "Christus," and was so similar in both imagery and traditions that he was sometimes confused with Christ by non-worshippers. Correspondence from Hadrian in 134 CE reads "The worshipers of Serapis (here) are called Christians, and those who are devoted to the god Serapis (I find), call themselves Bishops of Christ."
[48] Serapis was a composite deity of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian gods of the Ptolemaic period. He was likely created, like many composite gods, as a bridge between the Macedonian Ptolemaic rulers and the Egyptian population.
[49] Wessels, *Europe*, 35-37. The imagery of Christ as a young, beardless figure with the short, curly hair of many Greco-Roman figures fell out of popularity with the successful introduction of Christ as a Jupiter figure, which easily communicated his power to a predominantly Roman and Roman-controlled population of worshippers.
[50] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 185.

gods that many people still worshipped, in order to topple them from power by first matching and then surpassing rival pagan religions. This effectively commandeered the centuries-old power that these deities commanded in order to reduce the time that it would take for Christianity to develop its own independent artistic practices and, in a relatively short period of time, surpass the worship of pagan deities to stand alone as the major religion of the empire.[51]

As has just been argued, both Grabar's and Mathews' theories are equally evident within St. Catherine's Pantocrator. However, when considered together, a third influence within the iconography of Christ becomes evident, adding "philosopher" to the established influences of Byzantine emperors and pagan deities.

Christ The True Philosopher

In 2019, Emmanuel Eyo, a professor of philosophy, published "Jesus Christ the Philosopher: An Exposé" in which he presented a view of Christ as a philosopher in addition to a religious leader. Jesus of Nazareth, like philosophers, was a great orator who drew crowds of people and established a close following of at least twelve men who practiced and taught a particular school of thought.[52] His teaching centered around morality, ethics, and social philosophy, which he posed in a philosophical style using parables and debates.[53] Much of the New Testament is comprised of philosophy, with Jesus Christ employing rationality, logic, and reason to guide his arguments on morality.[54] To a Roman audience quite familiar with philosophers and their argumentative devices because of their veneration in Roman society and the classical

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[51] Ibid., 179.
[52] Arthur F. Taylor, "Plato to the Preacher: A Greek Philosopher on the Art of Public Speaking," *The Expository Times* 24, no. 6 (1913): 256.
[53] Emmanuel Eyo, "Jesus Christ the philosopher: An Exposé," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 7, no. 2 (2019): 21-23.
[54] Douglas Groothuis, "Jesus: Philosopher and Apologist," *Christian Research Journal* 25 (2009): 28-31.

education of the aristocracy, which mandated the study of the great Greek philosophers, the identity of Jesus may have been regarded similarly to philosophers by the Roman population.

In 2020, art historian Robin Jensen contributed a chapter in the book *Christian Teachers in Second Century Rome* entitled "Visual Representations of Early Christian Teachers and of Christ as the True Philosopher," in which she discussed how Christ appears as a philosopher in art, first discussing philosopher portraits as an established type. Images of fourth- and fifth-century BCE philosophers like Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), and Socrates (470-399 BCE) were highly influential in Roman political society **(Figure 25, 26, 27)**.[55] These figures were all depicted quite similarly, as older men wearing the Greek *himation* with receding hairlines or high foreheads, shorter hair, and long, full beards which eventually became a standardized type that denoted the figure's occupation.[56] In Roman society, the philosopher type carried over into other venerated figures, including the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE).[57] Himself a Stoic philosopher, this emperor was depicted both dressed in military garb or as a philosopher, always with the philosopher's full beard **(Figure 28)**. Responsible for much of the view of Roman emperors as intellectuals in addition to great soldiers, Marcus Aurelius was considered the ideal emperor in many ways, exemplifying Plato's idea of the "Philosopher-King," a man who possessed as much intellectual power as military authority.[58]

As the Roman world converted to Christianity, portraits in the philosopher type survived and were applied to new subjects, invoking the established representation of intelligence and

[55]Robin M. Jensen, "Visual Representations of Early Christian Teachers and of Christ as the True Philosopher," in *Christian Teachers in Second-Century Rome,* ed. Gregory M. Snyder (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 60.
[56] Ibid., 60.
[57] Roland. R. R. Smith, "Late Roman Philosopher Portraits from Aphrodisias," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 127.
[58] Stephen A. Stertz, "Marcus Aurelius as Ideal Emperor in Late-Antique Greek Thought," *The Classical World* 70, no. 7 (1977): 437. Philosopher-Emperors also include Hadrian and Julian the Apostate, whose own images were both influenced by philosopher portraits **(Figure 29, 30)**.

authority.[59] Depictions of pagan philosophers are nearly identical to Christian figures like prophets and apostles, who are iconographically portrayed in the same type with short hair, full beards, high foreheads, and wearing the *himation* and *chiton,* with only minor differences, such as the addition of a Gospel book or other Christian symbols, to identify them as Christian.[60] Philosopher traits are especially strong in icons of St. Peter, which depict him as an older man with a high forehead and full beard, clothed in a philosopher's garments **(Figure 2)**.[61] Peter may have taken on the philosopher type more easily than other apostles because he was chosen as the leader of the Church after Christ's death. Peter remained a significant figure who was seen as the founder of the Church and the keeper of the keys to Heaven, meaning that it was vital that this apostle be given an authority similar to that of Christ, resulting in Peter being rendered as particularly intellectual and authoritative. The depiction of the apostles, including St. Peter, in the philosopher type likely followed the development of the depiction of Christ using this type. Icons of Christ including St. Catherine's Pantocrator depict him in the Greek *himation* with a *chiton* and a long beard. Christ also holds the New Testament, his own philosophy of religion, just as, when not depicted as busts, philosophers held scrolls to signify their work **(Figure 1, 31)**.[62]

The theory of the "True Philosopher" may help to connect Thomas Mathews' and André Grabar's theories; the philosopher iconography of Christ developed alongside pagan and imperial influences, adding intellectual authority to the ruling power established by relating Christ to pagan

[59] Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity* (California: University of California Press, 1995): 337.
[60] Donald J. Bruggink, "True Philosopher/Pedagogue," *Western Theological Seminary* 1, no. 10 (1971): 71.
[61] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods,*127.
[62] Jensen, "Visual Representations," 68.

deities and emperors, suggesting that Christ was not only the "God of gods" and "King of kings," but the Philosopher of philosophers as well.[63]

While there are certainly visual connections, even striking visual similarities, between Christ, classical figures like philosophers, specific pagan gods like Serapis, and ample supporting evidence for Christ as an extension of the emperor or vice versa, many characteristics of the Pantocrator overlap, displaying traces of pagan gods, Byzantine emperors, and Greek philosophers that are nearly impossible to concretely sort into just one of these three categories. Christ's distinctive hair and his positioning within a niche-like structure are two such multi-faceted examples that point to the complex combination of influences seen in Christ's iconography.

Christ's Hair as a Complex Symbol of Power

Hair was an important component of the image of any deity or ruler in the classical era, however, Christ's hair does not precisely follow the long, curly style of a Greco-Roman male deity nor the short imperial style of the Byzantine emperor, nor even the slightly unkempt philosopher type.[64] The long style commonly seen in images of Christ can be linked to traditional depictions of classical figures, including gods and philosophers, and does not stem directly from Judaism or Christianity, whose holy books speak against men having long hair. Corinthians 11:14 states "does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace to him…?" while Leviticus 19:27 provides this decree:

> "They [Jewish men] shall neither shave their heads, nor let their hair grow long, but they shall keep their hair well-trimmed."[65]

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[63] *Holy Bible*, King James Version, Timothy 6:15 states "For at just the right time Christ will be revealed from heaven by the blessed and only almighty God, the King of all kings and Lord of all lords." Revelation 17:14 similarly reads "These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful."
[64] Barry Baldwin, "Images of Christ and Byzantine Beliefs," *Aevum* 58, no. 2 (1984): 144-148; J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Religious hair," *Man* 8, no. 1 (1973): 100-103.
[65] *Holy Bible*, King James Version, Corinthians 11:14, Leviticus 19:27.

The St. Catherine's icon, like most other images of Christ, has long hair which is either partially tied back or swept behind one shoulder, an unusual style for the depiction of a deity, ruler, or philosopher, none of which typically had hair of this specific length and style. Viewed in combination, however, a complex system of symbolism begins to emerge.

Major pagan gods like Jupiter were depicted with long hair in order to set them apart from the vast pantheon of other deities, including minor gods and heroes, who tended to have short hair, meaning that Christ's long hair may have been intended to connect him to the pagan signification of an alpha god **(Figure 11.1, 8, 9)**.[66] However, while Christ is shown with long hair, it is not loose and mane-like as most major gods were depicted, but rather pulled back so that it is rounded and halo-like around the face with tendrils in front of or behind the shoulders in a style most similar to the god Dionysus, with whom Christ was associated in early Christianity **(Figure 32, 4).** This hairstyle was, in the iconography of Christ, particularly long-lasting; in addition to St. Catherine's Pantocrator, it is seen in images such as the Byzantine mosaic *Deësis Pantokrator* c. 1261 and persists as late as a fourteenth-century Pantocrator on wood panel at the Byzantine Museum of Kastoria, both of which, like St. Catherine's icon, feature the Dionysian curled tendrils behind their left shoulders **(Figure 33, 33.1, 34)**. While this visual similarity between Christ and Dionysus is striking, presenting similar styles and lengths, it is unlikely that this was the sole influence in the development of Christ's peculiar hairstyle.

The subject of much iconographic debate, Christ's hair may find further associations with the philosopher in connection to depictions of John the Baptist, himself a wandering philosopher, whose iconography is extremely similar **(Figure 33.1, 33.2)**.[67] Both were biblically recorded as

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[66] Le Roux, "Greek Gods in Early Christianity," 485-487.
[67] Sheila Dillon, "Subject Selection and Viewer Reception of Greek Portraits from Herculaneum and Tivoli." *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13 (2000): 25.

having lived in seclusion in the desert for long periods, suggesting that their long hair was a symbol of lengthy meditation.[68] This meditative practice can be equated with Greek philosophy, which also promoted meditation, indicating that if the long hair of Christ is in fact representative of a figure focused on thought and meditation rather than bodily concerns like physical appearance, it was indeed intended to convey the philosophical nature of Christ.

While the difference of Christ's hair from the typical style of the philosopher, which was relatively short, can be connected to philosophical practices such as meditation, it also served as a visual device meant to set Christ apart in several ways, both from the apostles, who were usually depicted in the philosopher type, and from the vast group of revered classical philosophers with whom Christ was associated **(Figure 35)**. Often depicted among the apostles, the long hair of Christ differentiated him from the mass of similar figures who had the typical shorter hair of philosophers, as seen in another sixth-century icon from St. Catherine's Monastery depicting St. Peter **(Figure 2)**.[69] Even the hair of the apostles, directly influenced by classical images, was not normative to Greek or Roman society; philosophers purposefully did not visually conform in order to show that they stood in defiance of the accepted standards of the world.[70] Christ's long hair may have been intended to show that even among the philosophers, the most intellectual figures of society, Christ and his teachings were revolutionary, using his hair as a visual tool that placed him above these elite figures.[71]

Because Christ's long hair seems to escalate previously established representations of power that used hairstyles to signify status in both the depictions of pagan gods and of

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[68] *Holy Bible*, King James Version, Matthew 4:1-11 records Jesus' seclusion in the desert as he fasted for forty days and forty nights. Matthew 3:1-11 similarly recounts John the Baptist's life in the desert of Judea, where he preached for some time in the wilderness.
[69] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods,* 127.
[70] Ibid., 126.
[71] Jensen, "Visual Representations," 68.

philosophers, it can, through these associations, also be connected with imperial concepts like the power of the Byzantine emperor. In choosing this long hair to effectively place the authority of Christ above the rest of the figures in these two categories, the early Christian empire promoted an image of a philosopher-god that communicated Christ's hierarchical importance. Just as the emperor oversaw the Byzantine empire, including institutions of government and religion, Christ was shown to preside over both religious and intellectual stations, merging ideas of this new god as a deity, an emperor, and a philosopher.

It is worth noting that not every aspect of Christ's iconography can be explained even by considering several theories together. While the length of Christ's hair is suggestive of power, the style is particularly strange. It is decisively contained, unlike the long hair of pagan gods like Dionysus, whose curly locks cascade freely over his shoulders **(Figure 4)**. Instead, Christ's hair is usually swept behind his left shoulder, twisted and almost appearing plaited, bunched around his face and half covering his ears to create a circular shape that mimics a halo **(Figure 1, 18, 33.1)**.[72] This styling is not found in any known images before the depiction of Christ, but its persistence in icons suggests an iconographical significance. The securing of his long hair may have implied a utilitarian act, framing Christ as a god who took an active role in the lives of humans.[73] However, there is nothing to definitively suggest the basis or implications of this peculiar style. The lack of a concrete understanding of several characteristics of Christ's iconography exemplifies the necessity of accepting several sources in combination instead of attempting to ascribe everything to a single source.

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[72] Some images do feature Christ's hair symmetrically over both shoulders and not contained in this way. Icons of Christ *acheiropoieta* depict the imprint or likeness of Christ's face as left behind on a cloth. Bending down to wipe his face, his hair falls over his shoulders and frames an invisible neck. The symmetrical, unsecured hair in these images served to illustrate this motion and reasonably broke from the typical rendering of Christ.

[73] *Holy Bible*, King James Version, Matthew 13:55. Jesus is referred to as "the carpenter's son" or "the mason's son," suggesting his profession was the same as his father's. It is uncertain whether Jesus was a carpenter or a stone mason; the term "craftsman" may be more accurate than either.

The Classical Niche: Pedestal of Gods, Emperors, and Philosophers

Characteristics seen in icons of Christ which utilize multiple sources to communicate his power extend beyond the figure itself and can even be found in the background of icons like St. Catherine's Pantocrator, which places the figure within a niche **(Figure 1)**. In the classical world, niches were used to display statues of important figures, a tradition which survived throughout the Byzantine Empire and beyond. The use of a niche carried deeply rooted connotations of reverence and power that connected Christ to established traditions; statues and busts of pagan gods and philosophers were often displayed in such niches, while Byzantine Emperors were placed within a niche in both statuary and mosaics.

The Colossus of Constantine c. 312-315 CE was discovered in the western apse of the Basilica Nova in 1486, confirming that this massive sculpture of the first Byzantine emperor was viewed in a niche like the one that Christ occupies in St. Catherine's Pantocrator **(Figure 23, 36)**.[74] Imperial associations with such niches were so prolific that even Theodora, Empress of Justinian I, was depicted standing within a niche in a mosaic from San Vitale dated, like the Pantocrator, to the sixth century **(Figure 37)**. André Grabar's Emperor Mystique provides a smooth transfer of the usage of the niche from pagan practices discussed by Thomas Mathews to Byzantine imperial practices, eventually influencing early Christian art, which harnessed the niche's implications of power.[75] Figures within niches were viewed as authoritative and worthy of admiration, two qualities that matched with the developing identity of Christ that artists sought to convey to early Christian viewers.

Niches are pervasive in early Christian art, seen, in addition to the Pantocrator, in other icons in St. Catherine's collection including an icon of the Virgin Enthroned and an icon of St.

[74] Varner, "Images and the Expropriation of Imperial Identity," 59.
[75] Grabar, "God and the 'Family of Princes,'" 66.

Peter **(Figure 38, 2)**. Because of their status, it is fitting that these figures, who are vitally important to the Christian religion, are depicted within niches; artists communicated their intended reverence by utilizing an architectural feature classically reserved for figures of importance. The niches in both icons are quite similar, depicting receding spaces which these holy figures stand before, not within. The Virgin and apostle's niches feature registers of color topped by golden sections which give way to semicircular arched spaces that are painted blue and with golden stars, signifying a representation of the Heavens. While St. Peter's semi-circular niche is highly decorative, featuring registers of color and ornate symbols made from precious materials and gilding, conveying St. Peter's spiritual authority by placing him within the finest space imaginable, the niche in St. Catherine's Christ Pantocrator, now quite faded, may have originally been solid gold **(Figure 1, 2)**. This golden niche would have placed Christ in the Heavenly realm, serving a similar function as the blue and gold semidome by placing Christ in a highly luxurious, otherworldly space. The use of this architectural feature in several of St. Catherine's icons establishes a Christian tradition that is modified from the classical past.

However, like the discussion of Christ's hair, how Christ was depicted in this niche does not entirely conform to how classical and imperial figures were displayed, nor does it precisely copy any previous representations of figures set within niches. His relationship to the architectural feature is unique. Christ's niche notably lacks a top, the greatest difference between his relationship to the niche and that of any other figure. While he is positioned in front of the niche like St. Peter and the Virgin, he is not contained within it, nor is he grounded within the architectural space **(Figure 1, 2, 38)**. He seems to be floating, his shoulders nearing the top of the niche's walls while his head rises dramatically above it. Christ transcends the space; indeed, the

very structure of the niche itself and all its previous connotations are left behind and dwarfed by this figure.

Conclusion

Perhaps the transcendence into newness that is seen in Christ's iconography is the point that this thesis endeavors to make by suggesting the combination of pagan religious traditions, socio-political traditions like the philosopher type, and imperial associations. In pulling from several firmly established influences, the distinctions between them became, and remain, intentionally difficult to decisively identify within icons of Christ. For early Christians, this encouraged a figure which, while recognizable, could not be identified as any particular type and had to be viewed as a god-emperor-philosopher hybrid, crafting a new deity that commanded the power and authority of each of these identities while not precisely inhabiting any of them. The result is an iconography of Christ that centuries of art and evolution have constructed and that is, with certainty, a figure of complete authority and reverence. He is a god rendered like an imperial figure and styled like a philosopher to convey his divinity, his power, and his intellectual superiority. This Christ is a composite figure which, though based upon and supported by ancient traditions and their longstanding authority, remains itself, through this complex iconography, not quite like anything the world had ever seen.

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Images

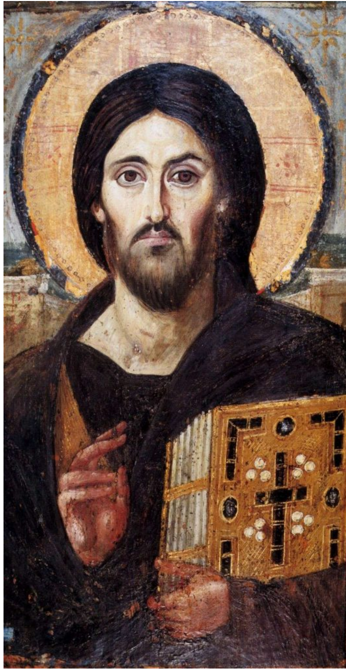

Figure 1 *Icon of Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery,* 84 x 45.5 x 1.2 cm. Sixth century CE, encaustic on wood panel. St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Egypt.

Figure 2 *Icon of St. Peter from St. Catherine's Monastery,* 92.8 cm high. Sixth century CE, encaustic on wood panel. St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Egypt.

Figure 3 *Hermes Carrying the Infant Dionysus,*Praxiteles, 2.15 m. c. 350-330 BCE, white marble. Originally at the Temple of Hera, Olympia. Now at the Archeological Museum, Olympia, Greece.

Figure 4 *Dionysus with Panther and Satyr (Ludovisi Dionysus).* Second century CE, white marble. Originally at the Quirinal Hill. Now at the Palazzo Altemps.

Figure 5 *Marble Portrait Bust of the Emperor Gaius (Caligula)* H. 20 in. (50.8 cm) length 7 1/16 in. (18 cm), c. 37-41 CE, marble. Found near Marino, Lago Albano. Now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 6 *Marble Portrait Bust of the Emperor Augustus* H. 53.34 cm, c. First century CE, marble. Now at the British Museum.

Figure 7 *Christ as the Good Shepherd* 49.5 x 26 x 16.2 cm, c. 280-90 CE, marble. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Figure 8 *Hermes Kriophoros* c. 1st century BCE, marble Late Roman copy of a Greek original *the Kriophoros of Kalamis*. Museo Barracco, Rome, Italy.

Figure 9 *The Baptism of Christ* c. First half of the sixth century, mosaic. Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, Italy.

Figure 9.1 Detail, *The Baptism of Christ* c. First half of the sixth century, mosaic. Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, Italy.

Figure 10 *Apollo Belvedere* H. 2.24 m, c. 130-140 CE, marble copy of a Greek original by Leochares c. 330 BCE. Likely found in Rome. Now at the Vatican Museum, Rome.

Figure 11 Marble head and arm of a colossal statue of Zeus. Head, H. 34 1/4 in. (87 cm); arm, L. 35 7/8 in. (91 cm 150–100 B.C. (Greek, Hellenistic period), marble. Found in Aigeira, Peloponnesos. Now at the National Archaeological Museum,

Figure 11.1 Detail, *Marble head and arm of a colossal statue of Zeus*. Head, H. 34 1/4 in. (87 cm); arm, L. 35 7/8 in. (91 cm 150–100 B.C. (Greek, Hellenistic period), marble. Found in Aigeira, Peloponnesos. Now at the National Archaeological Museum,

Figure 12 *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* 120 x 140 x 120 cm, c. 349 CE. Museo Tresoro, Basilica di San Pietro, the Vatican, Italy.

Figure 12.1 Detail, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* 120 x 140 x 120 cm, c. 349 CE. Museo Tresoro, Basilica di San Pietro, the Vatican, Italy.

Figure 13 *Isis and Suchos Enthroned,* date unknown. Tempera on wood panel. Found in Tebunis. Formerly at the Ägyptisches Museum, Staatliche Museen, Berlin (now destroyed).

Figure 14 Funeral portrait, man with beard, Fayum mummy portrait, 40 x 20 cm, c. mid-second century CE, encaustic on wood panel. Originally from a mummy in Fayum, Egypt. Now part of the Myers Collection, Eton College, Windsor, England.

Figure 15 *Icon of Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery,* two mirrored sides. Redo numbers from here

Figure 16 *Panel with Byzantine Ivory Carving of the Crucifixion,* 26.4 x 21.9 x 2.5 cm. c. 10-11 century CE, ivory, gold, precious stones. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 17 *Icon of Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery,* 84 x 45.5 x 1.2 cm. Thirteenth century CE overpainting (original sixth century CE), encaustic on wood panel. St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Egypt.

Figure 18 *Christ Enthroned, 1034-42 CE.* Mosaic with glass and gold tesserae. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

Figure 19 *Emperor Justinian and Members of His Court,* 264.2 x 365.8 x 12.7 cm. Sixth century CE, mosaic with glass and stone tesserae. Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

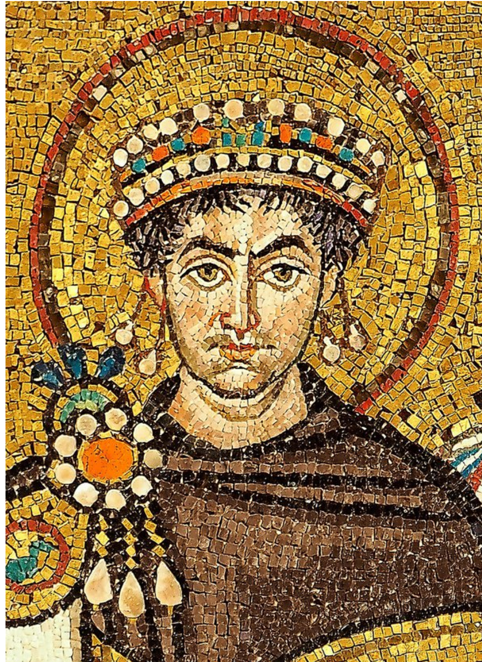

Figure 19.1 Detail, *Emperor Justinian and Members of His Court,* 264.2 x 365.8 x 12.7 cm. Sixth century CE, mosaic with glass and stone tesserae. Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

Figure 20 *Gold Solidus of Justinian I* 1.9 x 0.1 cm. c. 538-565 CE, stamped gold. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 21 *Gold Solidus of Justinian II* 19 mm. c. 692-695 CE, stamped gold. Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington DC.

Figure 22 *Gold coin of Trajan* 103-111 CE, solid gold. Minted in Rome, now at the British Museum.

Figure 23 *Colossus of Constantine* 2 ½ meters tall. 312-315 CE, white marble. Originally at the Basilica Nova. Now at the Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy.

Figure 24 *Panel with Painted Image of Serapis*. c. 100-200 CE, tempera on wood panel. J. Paul Getty Museum, California.

Figure 25 *Bust of Plato* 2nd century copy of a Greek original. The Vatican Museums, Rome.

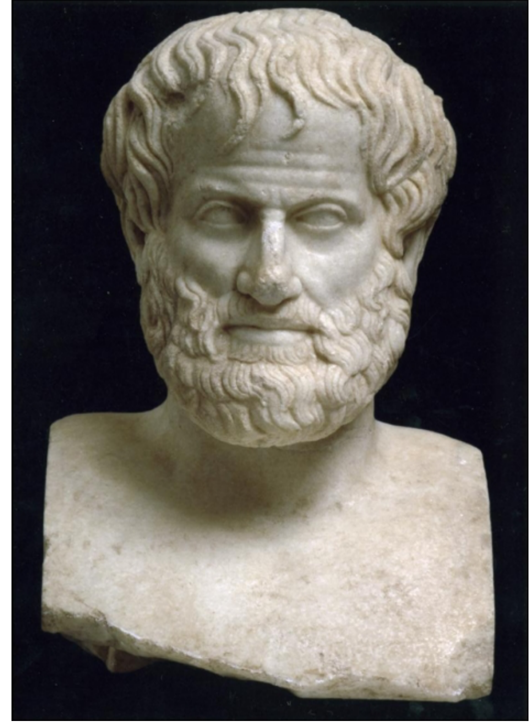

Figure 26 *Bust of Aristotle* 2nd century copy of a Greek original. The Acropolis Museum, Greece.

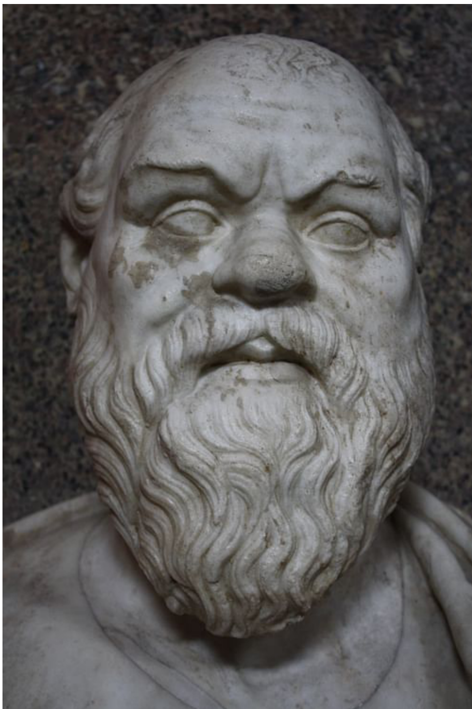

Figure 27 *Bust of Socrates* 2nd century copy of a Greek original. The Vatican Museums, Rome.

Figure 28 *Head of Marcus Aurelius* c. 160-169 CE, marble. Found at the Villa Adriana, Tivoli. Now at the Palazzo Massimo, Rome.

Figure 29 *Head of Hadrian* 52cm tall, c. 135 CE, marble. Found in the Villa of Los Torrejones, Spain. Now at the Museo Arqueológico de Yecla, Spain.

Figure 30 *Statue of Julian the Apostate* c. 4th century CE. Now at the Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

Figure 31 *Statue of an Unknown Cynic Philosopher* Roman marble copy of a 3rd century bronze Greek original. Now at the Capitoline Museum, Rome, Italy.

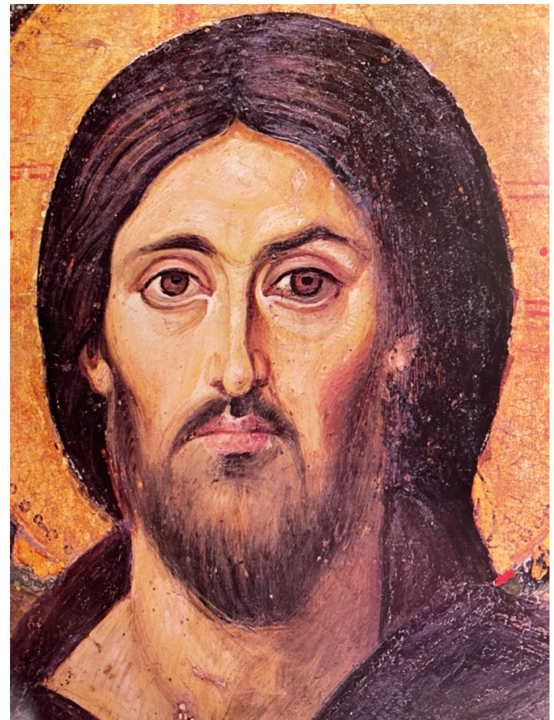

Figure 32 Detail, *Icon of Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery,* 84 x 45.5 x 1.2 cm. Sixth century CE, encaustic on wood panel. St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Egypt.

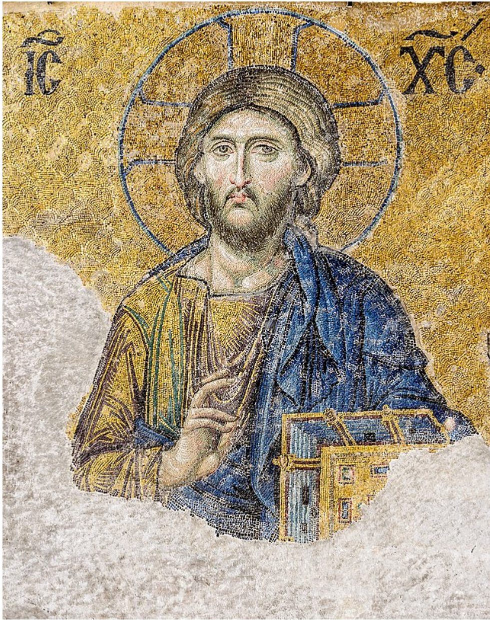

Figure 33 *Deësis (Christ with the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist),* 520 x 600 m. c. 1261, mosaic with glass and gold tesserae. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

Figure 33.1 Detail, *Deësis (Christ with the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist),* 520 x 600 m. c. 1261, mosaic with glass and gold tesserae. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

Figure 33.2 Detail, *Deësis (Christ with the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist),* 520 x 600 m. c. 1261, mosaic with glass and gold tesserae. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

Figure 34 *Icon of Christ Pantokrator* c. Fourteenth century CE, tempera on wood panel. Byzantine Museum of Kastoria, Kastoria, Greece.

Figure 35 *Portrait Heads of Socrates, Antisthenes, Chrysippos, and Epikouros* 1st century Roman marble copies of bronze Greek originals c. 200 BCE. Now at the British Museum, London, England.

Figure 36 Reconstruction of the Colossus of Constantine in the Basilica Nova. Courtesy of the University of Virginia.

Figure 37 *Empress Theodora and her Retinue* 264.2 x 365.8 x 12.7 cm. Sixth century CE, mosaic with glass and stone tesserae. Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

Figure 38 *Virgin Between St. George and St. Theodore* or *Virgin Enthroned* H 69 x W 48 cm, c. Sixth century, encaustic on wood panel. St. Catherine's Monastery, Egypt, Mount Sinai.