

TROELS MYRUP KRISTENSEN

MAKING AND BREAKING THE GODS

*Christian Responses to Pagan Sculpture
in Late Antiquity*



Making and Breaking the Gods

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Making and Breaking the Gods

Christian Responses to Pagan
Sculpture in Late Antiquity

Troels Myrup Kristensen

Aarhus University Press | 

Making and Breaking the Gods

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Cover. Head of Athena from Tel Naharon, dated to the second century and buried in a pit in Late Antiquity, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, inv. IAA 78.505 (courtesy of the Israel Museum).

Back cover. The so-called "Guidi Head", the head of the cult statue of Zeus from his temple at Cyrene, as reconstructed from numerous fragments (courtesy of Donald White).

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Acknowledgements

This book is a substantially revised version of my dissertation, *Archaeology of Response: Christian Destruction, Mutilation, and Transformation of Pagan Sculpture in Late Antiquity*, written in the Department of Classical Archaeology, Aarhus University, between 2007 and 2009, under the supervision of professor emeritus Niels Hannestad and professor Lea Stirling. The dissertation was defended in December 2009; since then I have been able to revise it and add some new material, although several important works arrived too late to be taken into closer consideration (notably Verity Platt's *Facing the Gods. Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion*, Cambridge 2011, which adds much to our understanding of Greek and Roman cult statues). The final rewrite was completed in the shady café of Bodrum Castle in summer 2012, and only very minor adjustments have been possible since then.

One chapter dealing with Christian crosses on pagan statuary that formed part of the original dissertation has been published separately (Kristensen 2012). Earlier versions of parts of this book have appeared in previous publications (Kristensen 2009, which appears by permission of Johns Hopkins University Press; 2010a and 2010b). The original dissertation also included an appendix on the diverse late and post antique treatment of Roman sculpture. However, since this appendix will soon be superseded by the volume *The Afterlife of Roman Sculpture – Late Antique Responses and Practices* (Kristensen & Stirling forthcoming), I decided that it would be superfluous to include it here. The contributions to that volume, which is based on two seminars held in Aarhus in September 2008 and March 2011 respectively, will explore many facets of late antique responses to statuary that complement those under discussion here.

Numerous individuals and institutions have been instrumental in supporting my work, and I would like to single out Birte Poulsen, Peter Stewart, Eric Varner (the three examiners at my defense), and Lea Stirling for all of their encouragement and advice, especially during the occasionally cumbersome process of reshaping the dissertation into a book. Lea Stirling in particular has followed this project from beginning to end and has always offered her expertise and help. For this, I am immensely grateful, and this book (as well as the original dissertation) would have been worse off without her. I hope this final version does not let her down.

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*

All dates are A.D., except otherwise noted. Classical author abbreviations (where used) follow *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition. Journal abbreviations in the bibliography follow the conventions of *L'Année Philologique*.

Driving Demons Away: The World of Demeas

In a frequently quoted but rarely scrutinized late antique inscription from Ephesus, a Christian man named Demeas triumphantly announced the destruction of a statue of Artemis to his fellow citizens (Fig. 0.1):

Having destroyed a deceitful image of demonic Artemis, Demeas set up this sign of truth, honouring both God the driver-away of idols, and the cross, that victory-bringing, immortal symbol of Christ.¹

Found in 1904 and originally erected prominently in the centre of Ephesus near the Library of Celsus, this unique inscription is widely believed to have reused a base that originally held a statue of Demeas' hometown's former patron goddess.² His inscription, written in elegiac verse, thus appears to bear direct testimony to the occasionally contested space of the late antique cityscape and a particularly Christian response to the images of pagan divinities that had been such an important part of Roman society,

1 [δαίμ]ονος Ἄρ[τέμιδος] καθελών | ἀπατήλιον εἶδος |
Δημέας ἀτρεκίης | ἄνθετο σῆμα τόδε |,
εἰδώλων ἐλατήρα | θεὸν σταυρόν τε | γερέρων,
νικοφό|ρον Χριστοῦ σύν|βολον ἄθανατον.

I Eph 4.1351, translation slightly amended from Horsley 1992: 108. The stone on which it was inscribed is 90 cm tall and 54 cm wide. Initial publication: Heberdey 1905: 69-70. The inscription is also published in Benndorf 1906: 103-104 (dated as “jünger als fünfte Jahrhundert”); Grégoire 1922: 34, no. 104 (dated to c. 435, with reference to *CTh* 16.10.25); Keil 1931: 98; and Guarducci 1978: 400-401, no. 8 (proposes fifth-century date based on letter forms). Further discussion of the inscription can be found in Foss 1979: 32; 69; Arnold 1989: 27; Thür 1989: 129-131; Mango 1994: 97-98; Karwiese 1995: 132; Trombley 1995: I, 101-102; 2008: 155; Bauer 1996: 283; Strelan 1996: 85-86; MacMullen 1997: 52; Günther 1998: 26; Merkelbach & Stauber 1998: 334-335 (c. 400); Rothaus 2000: 112; Moralee 2006: 206; Bauer & Witschel 2007b: 6; <http://laststatues.classics.ox.ac.uk>, LSA-610 (A. Sokolicek).

2 Thür 1989: Taf. 67 shows the findspot of the inscription. On the late antique urban context of Demeas' inscription, see Foss 1979: 30-45.



Fig. 0.1. *The Demeas inscription at Ephesus (photo: author).*

religion, and visual practices in general.³ Reflecting the religious changes that had received major stimulus from the imperial patronage that Christianity gained during the reign of Constantine, a pagan idol of Artemis (which other Christian sources refer to as the “daughter of Satan”) had now been replaced by a cross.⁴

The destruction of such idols has played an important role in narratives of the Christianization of the Roman world, both in the Christian tradition and modern historiography. Indeed, responses similar to Demeas’ can be observed in a patchwork of evidence, ranging from sources of questionable historicity, such as hagiographies, to the idealized world of ecclesiastical history, as well as in the archaeological record, consisting of finds of mutilated and fragmented sculpture whose treatment can be extremely difficult to date, interpret, and not least correlate with historical evidence. The

3 David Morgan offers a useful definition of visual practice as “a visual mediation of relations among a particular group of humans and the forces that help to organize their world” (2005: 55). With the phrase “Roman visual practices,” I refer to all those engagements with images that can be observed in the Roman world (east and west).

4 Daughter of Satan: Wright 1968: 10 (*The History of John, the Son of Zebedee, the Apostle and Evangelist*).

challenge that presents itself is how to read this complex evidence and to understand the conflation of rhetoric and reality that is implicit in much of it. The interpretation of Demeas' inscription is well suited to introduce the many different narratives into which this kind of evidence for a Christian response to pagan images can be placed, especially since its wider archaeological context has only rarely been looked at in any detail. It will thus here serve to outline some of the main topics of this book that investigates how Christians navigated the pagan sculptural landscape from the fourth to the seventh century (*i.e.* the period before Byzantine Iconoclasm).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess confidently whether a statue of Artemis ever really did stand on top of the base that Demeas reused for his inscription, as the top part of the base has been damaged, making it hard to detect any traces of what it once supported.⁵ Yet two holes (one deep and rectangular, the other more shallow and square) can clearly be discerned, indicating that it could well have supported the cross that is mentioned in the inscription (Fig. 0.2). Such a cross may have been made of wood or at least have had a wooden core; it has not survived. Whether the base was reused is rather less clear, as no signs of the original inscription or description can be discerned. If the base had previously supported a statue of Artemis, it certainly could not have been the main cult image from her majestic temple outside of the city walls (though we lack its precise dimensions, this is generally understood to have been a colossal statue, made of wood and adorned with rich textiles).⁶ But many other statues of the Ephesian Artemis abounded in the cityscape, urban sanctuaries, and public buildings, similar to how we see her reproduced across the Roman world in different sizes, forms, and media, and it is a distinct possibility that it is the destruction of one such image that Demeas refers to.⁷ The phrasing of the inscription, which refers to the image only in very vague, indirect, and derogatory terms (*δαίμωνος, εἶδος* and *εἰδῶλων*), does not give us much confidence that the original image could be identified. If the inscription is not a reused statue base, we cannot simply assume that it refers to the destruction of a representation of Artemis in the round or that all such images were purged by the early fifth century. Nor can we assume that the image in question belonged to the category of cult statue in our traditional sense. The inscription could even theoretically be an entirely rhetorical

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- 5 Thür 1989: 129. As Thür notes, the idea that the base had once supported an image of Artemis emerged already with the first publication of the inscription. The height of the inscribed block (90 cm) would make it a relatively low statue base (of the orthostat type), but does not rule out such an identification, see Højte 2005: 27-34; Fejfer 2008: 25-27.
 - 6 On the fate of the Temple of Artemis, see Foss 1979: 86-87. On the Ephesian cult statue of Artemis, see Fleischer 1973: 1-137; *LIMC* II (1984): 755-763 (R. Fleischer); LiDonnici 1992. On the role of cult images of Artemis in the religious and political life of Ephesus, refer to Elsner 2007: 228-242. Mussies 1990a: 194 notes that the inscription is "in pentameters and therefore in the epic dialect which does not use definite articles. The reference here might then be to *the* Artemis-statue, but of this we shall probably never be certain." This statement, however, disregards the archaeological evidence.
 - 7 Chapter I will discuss the nature of such replication of cult statues that fuelled a particular system of visual practices.



Fig. 0.2. *The top of the Demeas inscription, Ephesus (photo: author).*

construction that allowed Demeas to take credit for the semi-mythical destruction of a cult image, similar to how John Chrysostom and many other saints acquired special veneration and status in relation to episodes of iconoclasm, especially in cases where they were regarded as having played an important role in the conversion of a community.⁸ The layers of rhetoric that clearly are embedded in Demeas' inscription should then at the very least raise some caution in its use as a source for understanding the interaction between different religious groups in Late Antiquity. What may we then learn from this inscription?

Hilke Thür has suggested that the Artemis referred to in the inscription belonged to the sculptural decoration of the Gate of Hadrian, in front of which the inscription was placed.⁹ This is an attractive suggestion and finds a parallel case in Aphrodisias, where an image of Aphrodite was removed from the Tetrapylon and replaced by a carving of a cross, perhaps when it was restored in the early fifth century.¹⁰ Other evidence also points to the fact that the Gate of Hadrian received a Christian 'overhaul' in Late Antiquity, as it came to be adorned with several large crosses (similar to many other monuments on the Curetes Street) and Christian inscriptions on the northern facade.¹¹

8 On John Chrysostom and the cult image of Artemis, see Foss 1979: 34-35.

9 Thür 1989: 129-130.

10 Smith 2012: 319.

11 Thür 1989: 126-128; and see Plan 13.

One of these inscriptions is an acclamation to the emperor on behalf of one of the main circus factions which indicates that the gate was a place for popular expression.¹² The late antique Gate of Hadrian was a perfect space for venting popular sentiment, which certainly does not lessen the rhetorical impact of Demeas' inscription. We should imagine that the audience for the inscription was to be found among those who moved through the gate as part of their daily business. As the back side of the inscription was left rough and unfinished, the base was made for display in a setting where only three sides were visible, which fits well with its placement immediately adjacent to one of the pillars of the gate. The location of this gate, leading traffic away to the southeast of the Curetes Street and the *piazza* in front of the Library of Celsus, furthermore underlines its topographical significance and the dedicator's desire to make a potent visual statement in the cityscape.

When did Demeas erect his monument? This question is of major importance to the interpretation of his inscription and of the degree to which it reflects religious conflict on the ground; alternatively, it could instead be seen as a rhetorical exercise that fed off the Christian triumphalism of the age. The best internal evidence for dating the inscription is analysis of the letterforms, which seems to suggest a late fifth century date, notably from features such as the cursive delta, but unfortunately lacks clear comparanda.¹³ Stylistic traits also only provide a general fifth or even sixth century date.¹⁴ Given this lack of a secure chronological point of reference, scholars have relied on external evidence and assumptions concerning paganism's presence in the late antique cityscape. Several epigraphers have thus dated the inscription to *c.* 435, the year that an imperial edict against idolatry was issued, but the impact of this anti-pagan legislation has generally been overestimated, and it is highly unlikely that it can provide us with a date in this case.¹⁵ Others have argued that it would be unlikely that a statue of Artemis would have been standing in the cityscape for very long into the fifth century in Ephesus. Yet this view has to take into account both the nature of the image that Demeas takes credit for destroying and the rhetorical character of his inscription.

If we accept a date early in the fifth century, Demeas' statements would have been provocative, tapping into the dangerous waters of contemporary religious conflict, and mirroring such famous events as the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum in 392 (see

12 This acclamation is likely to have been partially altered in 609/10, see A. Cameron 1976: 148; Thür 1989: 128-129.

13 On letterforms, see *ALAZ004*: <http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/alaz004/narrative/script.html>. I am grateful to Charlotte Roueché for helpful suggestions as to the dating of the Demeas inscription.

14 Trombley notes that the stylistic evidence does not exclude a date in the late fifth century or perhaps even in the sixth century (1995: I, 101-102).

15 "Omnibus sceleratae mentis paganae execrandis hostiarum immolationibus dammandisque sacrificiis ceterisque antiquorum sanctionum auctoritate prohibitis interdicimus cunctaque eorum fana templa delubra, si qua etiam nunc restant integra, praecepto magistratuum destrui collocacioneque venerandae christianae religionis signi expiari praecipimus, scientibus universis, si quem huic legi aput competentem iudicem idoneis probationibus illuisse constiterit, eum morte esse multandum" (*CTh* 16.10.25).