



Conflict of Ancient Greek and Christian architecture during the first millennium

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Abstract

At first sight it looks like the division of architectural perception between the ancient Greek temples and the Christian churches was distinct, without cultural overlapping. A closer look, however, shows that there was serious conflict in the Byzantine Empire during the first millenium of Christianity. Examples of these effects can be seen today in Egypt and Greece where the monotheistic religion of Christianity, before its glorious achievements, attempted to destroy ancient Greek temples that were the heritage of beliefs in many Gods. However, the basic rules of applied structural mechanics, were carried on into the Christian era. The historical background of this conflict along with discussion of the archaeological site of Kythera that changed from Greek temples to Christian churches will be given in this paper.

1 Introduction

The development of the human mind in philosophy, geometry, theater (ancient Greek tragedies) and most of all architecture around the world today know of the contribution of the ancient Greek civilization. Two of the most representative structures of architectural achievement were inspired and built by Greeks of two distinctly different religions: the Parthenon in ancient Athens and Hagia Sophia in Constantinoupolis. The main structure of both survived for us to see today. What is significant however, is that although the cultural periods they represented are a thousand years apart, there was a period of about two hundred years that ancient Greek religion and architecture actively co-existed with the beginnings of Christian religion and architecture. The transition from idolatry (ancient Greek religion) to Christianity was not a smooth one, despite the fact that Christianity used the ancient Greek language and culture as media to become an ecumenical religion. The Greek people at first had accepted Christianity, but they considered the ancient temples as part of their heritage. To end the religious unrest,

Byzantine Emperors, that were more Roman than Greek, ordered partial or total destruction of ancient Greek temples in various parts in Eastern Mediterranean to establish Christianity as an ecumenical religion. The Goths that came from the West to attack Byzantium were diverted toward southern Greece. In their advance they looted and destroyed ancient Greek towns and villages.

The confrontation between religious conflicts was widely felt in Egypt and Asia-Minor and most of all in Greece proper: hieroglyphics in Egypt were defaced with chisel and hammer in disapproval of the polytheistic religion and in favor of one God. In Asia-Minor, ancient Greek temples were destroyed in order to build churches. In Greece most of the well-known ancient Greek temples were converted to churches. In the Peloponnisis region of southern Greece, however, there are historical accounts that the destruction by the Goths was brutal. Kythera, an island just off the southern tip of Peloponnisis and part of the region of Sparta, was included. There is no written historical account of the Kythera destruction, except for the accounts in local history and the remains of the temple of Aphrodite, that today are part of a chapel built with the large stone blocks and columns from the ancient acropolis. Remains of ceramics are abundant, but nothing else is shown. No attempt was ever made to find and restore the ancient acropolis of Kythera, as was done for many other archaeological sites in Greece.

2 The Parthenon

The most representative architecture of ancient Greek Temples is the Parthenon of Athens, fig.1. Here is how Jonathan Glancey [1] describes the Parthenon: *“...it is the greatest and most influential building of all time. It is a thing of immense beauty, as timeless in its appeal as a building can be.*

Pericles commissioned the Parthenon sometime after Greek victories over the Persians between 490 and 480BC. Phidias, the sculptor, was given the task of coordinating the building of the temples that overlooked the teeming city and its agora (marketplace) below. In turn Phidias turned to the architects Ictinus and Callicrates, who spent eleven years (447- 436BC) perfecting the great Doric temple in their charge.

Like all architecture, the exterior of the building was much more important than the interior. The climate encouraged the Greeks to spend much time meeting one another, so the colonnade – the external corridors of columns that ran around all sides of the Greek temple were all important. Sunlight played through these and gave the buildings a depth and magic that conventional brick or stone walls lacked. To ensure that the their temple looked perfect- perfectly straight and in perfect proportion- to the human eye, Ictinus and Callicrates used the technique known as entasis to ever so slightly deform the columns and architraves at the fronts and sides of the building. The distortion (there is not a true straight line to be found in the construction of the Parthenon) causes the eye to see straight lines where otherwise they would appear to curve or sag. It is a brilliant device, and required not only great mathematical judgement on behalf of the architects but immense skill on the part of the masons.

Like most, and perhaps all, Greek temples the Parthenon was brightly colored in reds, blues, and golds.

Symbolically, the Parthenon and its sibling temples represented key aspects of Greek society and culture. The temple was at once a place of gathering and worship as well as a representation of a Greek fighting ship (the basis of Greek power), a domestic loom (the root of every Greek household), and the people (demos) themselves. The people were represented by the columns that ran around the buildings as if clustering around the presence of Athena, whose huge statue stood at the heart of the Parthenon. The loom was represented by the temple fronts with their columns set, as with a loom, within a clearly defined frame. As for the fighting ship, that was suggested in the way in which entasis caused the columns, and thus the front, of the temple to billow out like a sail.

For the ancient Greeks, then, a temple like the Parthenon was not just beautiful and impressive, but was also a sign and symbol of all the core values that held their civilization together.

The Parthenon's legacy has been vast”.



Figure 1: The Parthenon

3 Hagia Sophia

Nearly a thousand years after the Parthenon construction, the world had changed in many ways. Following ancient Greece, Rome became the dominant empire. Despite its military might, culturally and religiously it followed the path of ancient Greece. The Roman military engineering, however, had advanced the state of the art of building large structures. The arch and the dome were in wide use in Roman construction. The Pantheon in Rome, built in 118-128AD was an excellent example of the expertise of the roman master builders.

But what were the motives of this construction? What values did they represent? One motive was the need the Emperors had for a large interior for their coronation ceremonies and the welcoming of the their generals, after their victories. Another was the need to demonstrate the might of the empire by



changing the geometric scale of the structure that was used in the Greek temples with regard the human perception. Pantheon was as high and as large as it could be, so that when the people entered it they were overwhelmed with awe imposed by the vastness of the structure. Certainly different from the human values the Parthenon represented in Athens.

It was with these imperial Roman values that Constantine established the New Rome in Byzantium in 330AD. He had accepted Christianity as a state religion since 313. The destruction of ancient Greek temples were carried out by decree of the New Roman Empire, after several attempts were made, one by Emperor Julian to re-establish the ancient Greek culture that included language and religion. Constantine accepted Christianity as a state religion, but in return he also accepted a joined leadership in the decision making of the new Empire with the hierarchy of the Church (the Patriarch), especially in matters of religion.

It was with this background that the destruction of the ancient Greek temples was carried out in southern Greece and in the island of Kythera. In Athens all the ancient temples were converted to Christian churches. It was the time that the schools of ancient Greek philosophy, theater and music ceased to exist. Some of the teachers went as far as Persia to find work. With the years, churches were erected inside some of the temples like the Parthenon, using the stones and columns from the collapsed temples around it.

Architecture had followed the conversion vicissitudes of the human culture. The enclosed, restricted churches replaced the opened air temples. The church consisted of three parts: the narthex portico at the entrance, where the newly converted Christians stood until they were ready to enter the main Hall, the Nave, of the Basilica. At the head of the church, located always at the East Side of the building was the sacred area where only the male clergy and their assistants were permitted to enter. The two-dimensional icons that decorated the wall, or temple, built in front of the restricted area, had a metaphysical significance, a sort of curtain between this life and the one beyond.

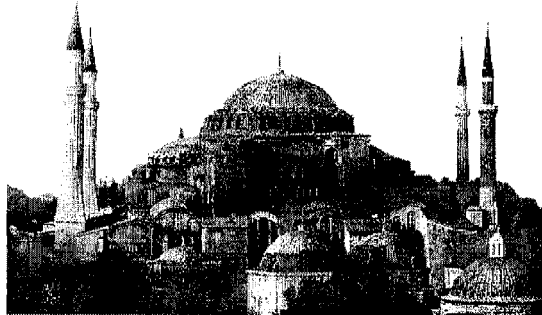
It was emperor Justinian of the Eastern Empire who revolutionized not just church building, but architecture as a whole with one of the most significant and adventurous buildings of all time, the church of Hagia Sophia, 532-537AD (fig. 2a,b). Its dome structure was to become the basis of such great Renaissance cathedrals as St. Peter's of Rome and St. Paul's of London. The architects were Anthemios of Tralles and Isidorous of Militus. They were skilled engineers and mathematicians. What Anthemios and Isidorous did was to create a vast place of congregation, a space under great vaulted ceilings and the astonishing central dome, free from interruption by columns and intervening walls. The result is as breath taking today as it was in the sixth century, even though the church has lost much of its decorative luster and the windows high up in the walls have been made smaller. The concrete dome was said (by the court historian Procopius) to be 'suspended by a golden chain from heaven'. Only less prosaically, it was supported by four pendentive vaults, which sprang from the four lofty arches that defined the enormous central space below the dome. Lavishly decorated, the Hagia Sophia showed a number of breaks from the Classicism of Rome; the columns, for example, were topped with capitals decorated with serpentine



foliage. Clearly the pragmatic, if ordered, architecture of the west was being seduced by the sensuality and more organic architecture of the East [1].



a) Inside view



b) Hagia Sophia, Constantinoupolis

Figures 2a,b: Hagia Sophia

Ancient Greek temples remained in disgrace for many centuries after the conversion of the Greek people to Christianity. In the ancient Greek temple of Sounion, south of Athens, for example, many visitors carved their names on the marble stones of the disgraced temple with impunity: one of them was the well known Lord Byron from England.

Where churches were built with the stone blocks and columns from the ancient Greek temples, it signified the subjugation of the idolatrous ancient Greek culture to the Christian culture. Religion in the Byzantine Empire was an every day confrontational preoccupation.

During the renaissance years, however, the ancient Greek culture was resurrected by the western academic societies that were established by the Western Church. Most of the knowledge about ancient Greece came from the Arabs when they occupied part of Spain. The Arabs from today's Iraq region had visited ancient Greece and for many years translated the Greek manuscripts. The early Christians destroyed all original ancient Greek manuscripts, both in Athens and during the burning of the ancient library of Alexandria probably in 340AD, or by the European crusaders, when they sacked Constantinople in 1203.

Following the Renaissance years, the ancient Greek culture was widely recognized and incorporated in all the western educational systems. In Greece, the churches were removed from the ancient Greek temples after 1821 when Greece became a nation: the dual origin was finally accepted, "descendants of Odysseus and followers of Jesus Christ". Slowly the ancient Greek culture has been accepted as the foundation of all western societies.

The example of Hagia Sophia structure was followed all over Greece, just like most of the ancient Greek temples followed the Parthenon architecture. After the Renaissance years the ancient Greek culture and Christianity lived in peace. The magnificent churches built from the 6th through the 18th centuries in Europe were architectural achievements inspired by the Christian faith and financed by many western emperors and Christian Churches. In the late 18th and during the 19th centuries, however, the technological revolution that was unleashed during the Renaissance years with the help of the ancient Greek education in Logic, Philosophy and Mathematics, surpassed the Christian era architectural achievements. Examples are shown today in all western capitals, where the churches co-exist with the imposing multi story-buildings.

Looking closer at the building techniques from ancient Egypt structures to the ancient Greek temples, through the Roman engineering achievements, we observe an accumulation of construction knowledge, an undefined continuity, both in the principles of mechanics and building techniques. Architecture and engineering served the people to satisfy their need to express themselves over the last three thousand years: the history of these heritage structures represents the history of western civilization.

4 The Paleokastro of Kythera

The remains of the religious conflict of the first millenium exist to this day in the island of Kythera, located in the southern part of Greece, between Peloponnisos and Crete. From archaeological findings [2] it is known that the walled-in ancient city of Kythera was built on top of a mountain with precipitous perimeter during the 6th century B.C. It was built like an Acropolis with its own Shrine devoted to goddess Aphrodite: today the area is called Paleocastro (old castle), (fig. 3). The Goths that invaded the area of southern Peloponnisos by land and by sea destroyed it sometime after 267AD [3], although there is no apt evidence to this day in the island to prove it, only historical conjecture. Judith Herrin [2] writes that the church of Hagios Kosmas on top of Paleokastro was built with stones and columns from the ancient Shrine of Aphrodite (fig. 4), before the mid-

seventh century: we also know that the old city of Kythera was thriving until the end of the second century. Furthermore, Kythera was not part of the Byzantine Church, but instead it belonged to the ecclesiastical province of Illyricum that was dependent on Rome. According to Herrin the attempts to stamp out the pagan religion was not successful. This may justify the opinion of archaeologists today who content that Paleokastro was no longer needed for protection and eventually it was abandoned in favor of other settlements in the island.

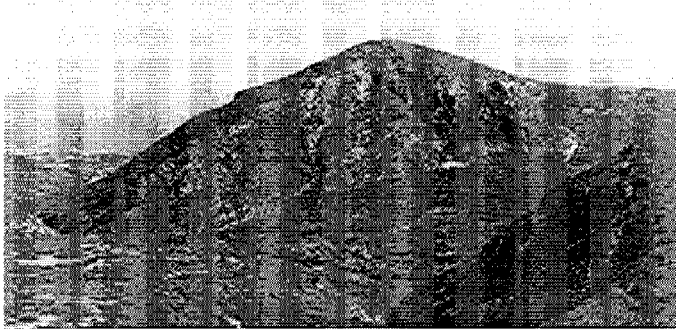
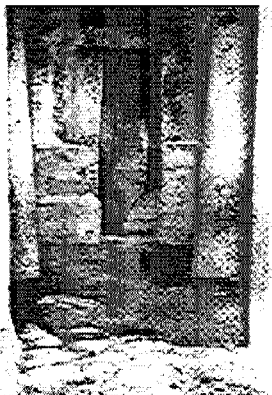


Figure 3: The Paleokastro.

Paysanias, a traveler from Asia-Minor, in the second century A.D., wrote that he visited the fortified city (Paleokastro) and the Aphrodite Shrine and that it was ten stades inland from Scandea the port city, which agrees with the measured distance of today. Earlier, Homer and others mentioned the island and at one time both the Minoans and Myceneans coexisted in Scanteia. In a mountain opposite Paleocastro, where today there is the chapel of St' George, a Minoan Shrine was fount recently by Greek archeologists.

There is nothing today to show the ancient acropolis in Paleocastro. The place is deserted, except for the chapels of Agios Kosmas and Agios Georgios. In 1963, a joint expedition of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the British School at Athens selectively excavated the area of Kastri (old Scandea). Between the many things they evaluated [2] it was the little church of Agios Kosmas, built with the stone blocks and columns from the ancient shrine of Aphrodite. It is worth mentioning that not a single stone of the perimeter of the castle or other structures are visible today: obviously they were all taken and used in the new nearby towns that emerged in later years.

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a) Hagios Kosmas, from narthex



b) Hagios Kosmas, view towards apses



c) Archaic Doric capital



d) Archaic Doric capital

Figures 4a,b,c,d: Hagios Kosmas. [2]

G. L. Huxley [2] wrote: *Into the chapel of Agios Kosmas on Paleokastro mountain there are built the remains of columns and half columns, all unfluted, together with archaic Doric capitals of poros stone; there are also several large cut poros blocks and part of an architrave with guttae. Schliemann (1888) thought that the temple of Aphrodite lay hereabouts... There were still in the late eighteenth century two upright columns at a place called 'kolonnes', a terrace 400 meters west of Agios Kosmas [4]. We suggest that the temple may have been built between the two chapels, Agios Georgios and Agios Kosmas, so that it was visible by the sailors in Scandeia.*

They considered the possibility of restoring the Shrine. Here is what Hugh Plommer wrote [2]: *We have, then, a collection of fragments, all perhaps taken from one small Doric building of the late sixth century B.C., which exhibit several features of the late Laconian School and are paralleled at Amyclae and Artemis Orthia. They entail one inexplicable feature, narrow and (probably) lofty metops; and while, aesthetically, restoration as a small orthodox Doric temple,*

tetrastyle prostyle (with the architrave block from the cella), would suit all the remains, it seems too small, almost too pycnostyle to be of any use. A small stone stoa, with wide intercolumniations, is, I suppose, just possible; but highly unlikely at this place and date.

Amyclae was the ancient city of Menelaos located south of Sparta.

5. Conclusions

At the structure of Agios Kosmas, fig. 5, the large stone blocks in such a small chapel beg for their proper restoration. First, however, an archaeological search is needed in the area of Paleokastro, fig. 3, to locate the exact place of the Aphrodite Shrine, to unearth more evidence of the origins of the ancient city of Kythera and to establish the chronological period of its destruction: was it a slow deterioration, or an abrupt destruction?

Restoration in this case has the broader meaning of restoring the deserted mountaintop of Paleokastro to its original cultural significance. It will represent a sight not just for the Kytherians, but for all people who appreciate the roots of western civilization.



Figure 5: Hagios Kosmas, exterior view



References

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