CHAPTER SEVEN
IMAGES AND POWER

I. Sculpture in Late Antiquity

In the ancient and late-antique world, sculpture was much more than just physical representation. Like all visual images, sculpture and statuary were polysemous. Not only did individuals perceive them differently, different social groupings (often quite fluid) could understand statuary to serve different functions. Statues meant diverse things to diverse viewers, and the viewers often were not always seeing them as private individuals but as part of a larger group. The elevated portrait of Constantine in his eponymous forum in Constantinople, while exceptional, bears witness to the polysemous nature of the graven image. Constantine as Helios was a dominant image in the eastern capital through the sixth century. The statue was also discernible, however, as Constantine as the thirteenth apostle. In this instance, Constantine presumably intended for his statue to have a dual nature. The intentions of the creator are, however, often different and perhaps irrelevant to the perceptions of the viewers; statuary does not have to be conceived as polysemous to be polysemous.¹

¹ Constantine: Fowden (1991); Krautheimer (1983) 61-4. See Julian (Ep. 48) for his objections to the statue as a reducer of faith. The employment and function of sculpture in late-antique society remains largely unstudied, but see Barasch (1992); Barnard (1974); DACL XV.2, c.v. "statue", 1657-65. Regional studies are likewise lacking, but see the important work on post-Roman Britain in Merrifield (1987) 97-101. For images in early Byzantium see Mango (1963). Av. Cameron (1979) discusses the use of images to link political and religious power. For earlier periods and interpretive frameworks, Faraone (1992) is important. C. Mango (1963) has written on attitudes toward sculpture in the Byzantine period, and Av. Cameron and J. Herrin have published an edition and translation, with commentary, of the important eighth century Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai. See Av. Cameron (1984) 1, 32n.80 for a discussion of Mango’s work. Martroye (1921) is a brief article discussing the legislation and offering possible examples of such destructions. Saradi-Mendelovici (1990) illustrates the often ambiguous and mixed reaction of Christians to pagan structures, and many of her argument concerning temples apply equally well to statues, see esp. p. 60. Most recently see the important work of Mathews (1993). Mathews rejects, quite successfully I think, the received interpretation that early Christian art is linked to imperial motives. Mathews indicates the supreme importance of the visual image of not only representing religious controversies, but in defining and investigating the issues. While his core subject matter is different than that pre-
Of particular interest to this study are changing reactions and responses to sculpture in a period of religious tensions and transformations. The vicissitudes of the evidence, especially from Corinth, ensure that positive attitudes are little manifested in the archaeological record; violent reactions leave the clearest traces in archaeological and documentary evidence. The reader should not be mislead by the dominant role of evidence for negative attitudes in this chapter. Moreover, a dearth of similar studies demands that this chapter begin with a general study incorporating evidence from mainland Greece and Asia Minor.

The majority of our late antique sources agree that statues possess power. This attitude is not unique to late antiquity and is amply demonstrable for other periods. It may, in fact, be a constant for most of the premodern world. This concern with the nature of power in statues, as well as the manner in which such power should be treated appears often in Christian polemic. Polemicists offered two general refutations to the beneficial nature of power in the statues. Some argued that the statues held no power and the belief in such was mistaken. Others maintained statues do indeed possess power, but it is the power of daimones and thus only detrimental.

The arguments that statuary held no power are of little use here beyond demonstrating that such ideas were possible. Clement of Alexandria (46P (cf. 81P)), writing in the third century, provides an appropriate example. He noted that swallows and birds land on statues and defile them, and fire and earthquakes do not respect them. If statues had any power, much less were filled with the powers of a god, they would not tolerate such actions. Clement echoed and demonstrated a simple approach; statues are inanimate and powerless, and this is evident by the abuse heaped upon them. Although we hear this interpretation of sculpture infrequently, it should not be dismissed or forgotten. Clement's effort to dispel the idea of empowered statues confirms, however, that for many this belief was entrenched.

Other Christian polemicists saw the power of daimones in statues. Minucius Felix (200-240 A.D.), perpetuating a common argument, elaborated upon the habits of these beings and described their powers (27.1-3):

sented here, he sees the central importance of statues in worship (180): [The old gods'] health depended on the upkeep of their statues, and as these crumbled, their influence waned." An issue Mathews does not delve into, but worthy of consideration, is the relative abandonment of sculpture as an art form at the end of the late antique period.

Frankfort (1946) 134-5 (Mesopotamia); Wilson (1951) 221 (Egypt); Geary (1983) 134-5 (Medieval Europe); Mango (1963) (Byzantine); Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai, infra. (Byzantine). Gordon (1979) argues, successfully I think, that the same attitude towards statues persisted for more than 1000 years, despite political and social changes. For animated statues see also Trombley (1993) 49.

The use of the term daimones is more than a semantic nicety. The daimon is the entity or force that acts on man. A theos can be a daimon, but a daimon is not necessarily a theos. To translate the term as "demon" begs the question. Certainly for many Christians daimones were demons: malevolent beings and forces. But we are dealing with a period when this attitude is being created, and to presume the definition denies the ample evidence of Christians who were able to see daimones as beneficial. See Burkert (1985) 180-81 for the definition.