JUDAISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BYZANTINE ART

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This undertaking—to consider the Jewish contribution to the development of the Christian artistic tradition—requires a bit of an explanation in 2011. Although the subject has long been a focus of scholarly interest, the study of Judaism’s relationship to pagan and especially Christian art has been attacked, during the past decade or so, as inherently “orientalist” and even “anti-Semitic.” To be sure, recent studies on Late Antique Jewish art, the work of Jaś Elsner in particular have correctly refocused attention on the immediate contexts in which surviving Jewish monuments can profitably be studied.\(^1\) Other scholarship examined the historiographical questions with subtlety and intelligence, casting a clarifying light on the intellectual and political forces that have directed the study itself.\(^2\) The glibness of certain revisionist writing is hardly conducive to serious discussion, however, such as Annabel Wharton’s dismissal of James Henry Breasted’s *The Oriental Forerunner of Byzantine Art* as “historical sabotage”;\(^3\) and the tone of such a-historical polemics should not be allowed to scare off scholars interested in questions other than “the Jewish content of ancient Jewish art,”\(^4\) however important, indeed central, that issue may be.

Any consideration of Judaism’s place in the history of Byzantine art must still begin with the synagogue at Dura Europos.\(^5\) Despite the

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remarkable finds in Eretz Israel during the three-quarters of a century since it was unearthed, the extraordinary painted assembly hall on the banks of the Euphrates remains the keystone in the construction of a history of medieval Jewish art, and in turn, of its impact on later Christian tradition. Even before the synagogue was excavated, Breasted had prepared a foundation for Dura’s centrality when he related the flat, hieratic style of the paintings in the pagan temples to what he perceived to be the most salient features of Byzantine art, stretching the line of descent all the way to the *maniera greca* of fourteenth-century Tuscany. No one would be so bold today to repeat Breasted’s hypothesis that painters in Dura

after the disappearance of Palmyra, would easily accept Christianity…and following the same traditions in style, technique, and composition, the successors…must have the virgin, the Savior, the apostles, the great Church Fathers, and the newly converted sovereigns, precisely as we have them in the mosaics of Ravenna, which are the lineal descendants of these mural paintings of ancient Dura.

To the extent that they seem valid at all, such stylistic similarities would now be understood as a common heritage from Sassanian typologies, or more broadly, from what Ernst Kitzinger long ago termed “sub-antique” art, that is Roman classicism reinterpreted through diverse, indigenous traditions.

By introducing the notion of a direct relationship between the Dura paintings and later Christian art, however, Breasted’s book prepared the way for connections to be made between the Jewish subjects discovered in the Dura synagogue and the great tradition of painting that was to emerge in Constantinople and the Byzantine territories. In the report of the sixth season of excavations published in 1936, Carl Kraeling wrote that the Dura synagogue suggests that Christian

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6 J. Breasted, *Oriental Fore-Runners of Byzantine Painting: First-Century Wall Paintings from the Fortress of Dura on the Middle Euphrates* (Chicago, 1924); in this, he was elaborating ideas first set forth systematically by J. Strzygowski in *Orient oder Rom* (Leipzig, 1901), though Breasted did not cite the work.

7 Breasted, *Oriental Fore-Runners*, 73.