A pagan goddess in the Christian Late Roman and Byzantine Empire (AD 324–1453) might sound like a paradox, particularly if that goddess is Aphrodite, Venus to the Romans. Both names, however, Aphrodite and Venus, continued to be used in Late Antiquity, referring to the same deity. As a deity associated with sexuality, a vice much hated by the Church Fathers, not only because of its strong association with pagan cults and rites, but also because it went against the idea of sexual purity that the church was trying to promote. Despite the agenda of the official church, however, descriptions of statues of the goddess survive in literary sources from the Christian Empire, primarily in the imperial capital of Constantinople, as well as a number of representations in mosaics and portable works of art, albeit on a limited scale. Here I will survey the statues and portable works of art depicting the goddess from Late Antiquity and medieval Byzantium, with a view to understanding the phenomenon.

1 All dates in this chapter are AD, unless otherwise noted. I would like to thank David Gwynn for his feedback on this chapter.

2 In the Middle Byzantine period the only name used in literary sources and artistic media is Aphrodite.

across the empire and in the transition to Christianity. For the statues, I will be looking at their descriptions and the reactions they provoked. As far as portable works of art are concerned, Aphrodite was predominantly associated with women and their world, especially marriage, adornment, and prostitution. It is not surprising, therefore, to find images of the goddess on artifacts associated with these activities, such as jewelry, toiletries, or caskets. I will argue that the imagery of Aphrodite in Late Antiquity may also reflect theatrical plays and thus throw more light on a less well-known dimension of daily life. I will look at the period between the fourth and tenth centuries, in both the public and the private spheres. For my purposes, the public sphere is defined as nondomestic, and the private sphere as the strictly domestic environment.

Aphrodite in the Public Sphere

In order to better understand the presence of pagan Aphrodite or Venus in Byzantium, we should look briefly at the transition from paganism to Christianity. Constantine the Great (306–337) was the first Roman emperor to accord Christianity legal status. The emperor Theodosius I (378–395) proclaimed it as the official religion of the empire. In the Theodosian Code, a collection of Roman law edicts under the Christian emperors from the fourth and fifth centuries compiled under Theodosius II (408–450), we find laws proclaiming sacrifices illegal and closing pagan centers of worship. Given that paganism was still resilient to Christianity until at least the late sixth century, one effect of this legislation was that attitudes towards anything that could be construed as pagan became more aggressive, at least in the public sphere. From the

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4 Earlier scholarship on Aphrodite from this period has been limited to Egypt in Late Antiquity (330–640). See, for example, Lila Marangou, “Ὁστέινο ἀνάγλυφο Ἀφροδίτης ἀπὸ τὴν Αἴγυπτο,” in Κέρνος. Τιμητική προσφορά στὸν καθηγητή Γεώργιο Μπακαλάκη (Thessaloniki, 1972), pp. 84–95; Elisa Buono, “From Goddess to Virgin: Transformations in the Eastern Empire,” in The Survival of the Gods: Classical Mythology in Medieval Art, An Exhibition by the Department of Art, Brown University Bell Gallery, Providence, Rhode Island, February 38–March 29, 1987 (Providence, 1987), pp. 85–95. Neither of these sources covers the Middle Byzantine period, nor do they explain the presence of the image of the goddess in Christian times.


6 Cod. Theod. 16.10.7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 19, 25.