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EARLY CHRISTIAN AND BYZANTINE ART



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EARLY CHRISTIAN AND BYZANTINE ART

IN A.D. 330 the ancient Greek city of Byzantium, rebuilt and enlarged, was solemnly inaugurated by the Emperor Constantine the Great under the name of Constantinople. The City, a "New Rome" in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Constantine's own conversion to Christianity, were the physical and spiritual bases of the Byzantine Empire. It was not a new Empire, but the Roman Empire in a new setting, and Byzantine art is not a new art. The spiritual content and purpose of Christianity are indeed new; but in its approach to all the problems of representation it rests firmly on a Mediterranean basis. The rule of Byzantium, over many countries and many races, lasted into the fifteenth century; the influence of its art is even now not dead. Foreign strains and influences may often be seen in that art but Greece and Rome are fundamental to it.

The illustrations in this book give a general view of the development. During the Middle and Later Roman Empire the "imperial" art of Rome and the great cities merged with the rougher impulses and techniques of the Provinces: Early Christian art was the child of this fusion, sometimes traditional and nostalgic (Plate 1), more often hieratic and stylised (Plate 3). A Christian narrative tradition appears (Plates 4 and 6), derived probably from lost originals in Rome, and to be of profound importance for the future. The skill of the weavers of Coptic Egypt is illustrated by Plates 5, 7–9.

The " Iconoclast " controversy, turning on the propriety of representing the Deity in human form, disturbed the Empire throughout the eighth and ninth centuries. Few works of art survive from these 200 years, and in the Museum's collections they are almost a blank. But in the tenth century there was a great revival. The memories of Classical Greece again inspired the capital (Plates 12–13), and Byzantine religious art came to its fruition (Plates 15-19, 21, 24 and 25). This is an art which gains its effect by rhythm and the repetition of the human form against a blank background ; with a content not narrative but liturgical ; with a strange, supra-human appeal, and figures which are on this earth and yet not of it.

Plate 26 is a miniature mosaic of the thirteenth century, when the Christian narrative tradition had again been reintroduced into Byzantine art. Plates 27–28 show its powers of lasting unchanged. In its purest form it was an art resting on dogma, expressing a revealed religious truth to which time and human history are alike irrelevant ; there could be no " Renaissance " in the Western European sense to bring it new life.

G.B.



1. Leaf of an Ivory Diptych. Roman, late IVth century. 11⅜in. x 4¾in.

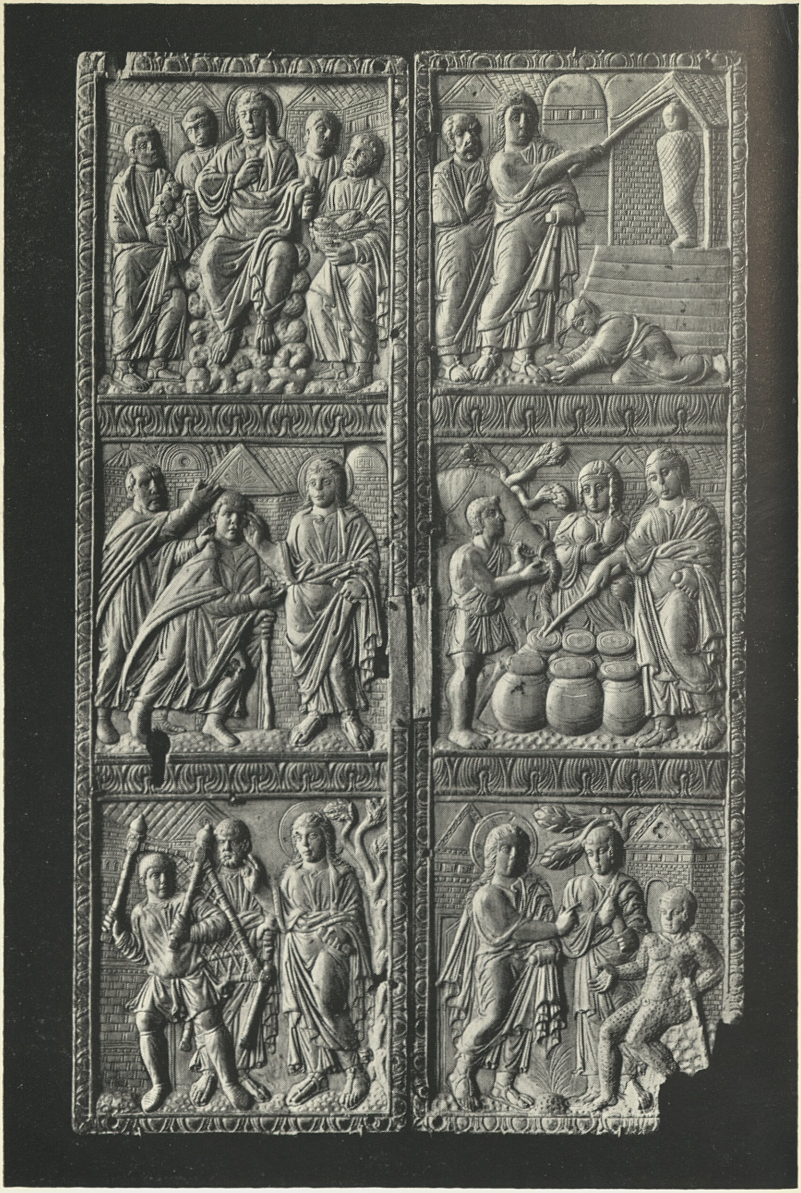
212—1865



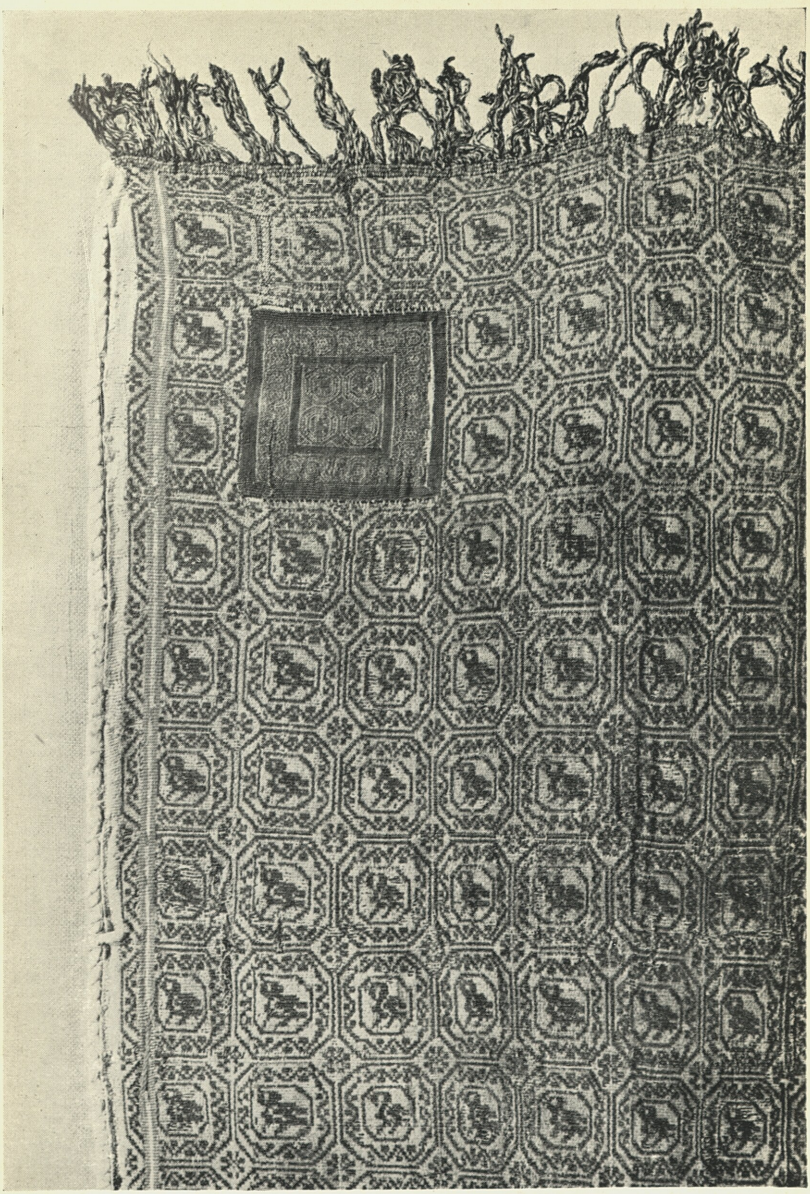
2. Red porphyry Statuette. Egypto-Roman, IIIrd century. H. 8¼in.
A.1—1939



3. Counterpoise for a steelyard weight ; bust of an Empress. Byzantine, first half Vth century. H. 6½in., W. 3½in. M.74—1947



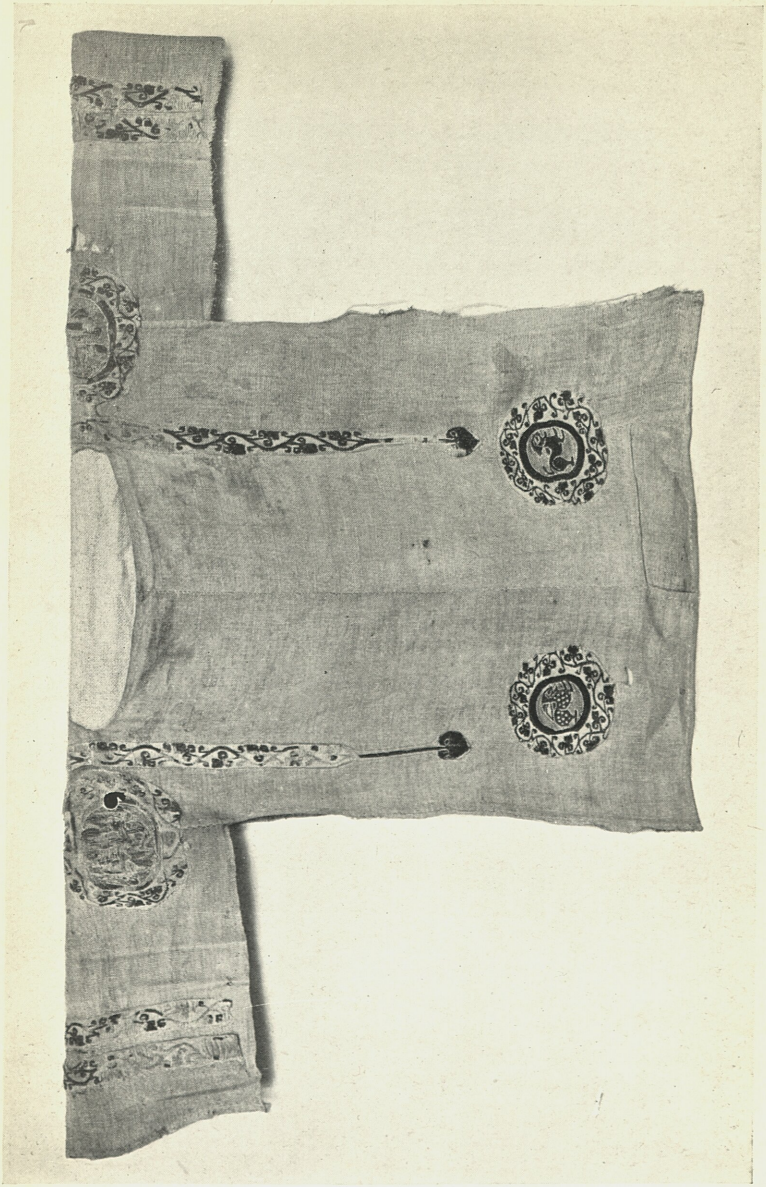
4. Ivory Diptych ; the Christian Miracles. Italian, Vth century. 12in. x 3$\frac{7}{8}$in. (each leaf). A.47 & A.—1926



5. Woollen cloth, tapestry and draw-loom woven. From Akhmim. Egyptian, perhaps IVth century. 24in. x 17in. 243—1890



6. Ivory Relief; part of the Miracle of Cana. ? Alexandrian, VIth century. 4½in. x 3⅝in. A.1–1921



7. Child's Tunic, with tapestry-woven ornament. From Akhmim. Egyptian, IVth–Vth century. 1.16½in. 257–1890



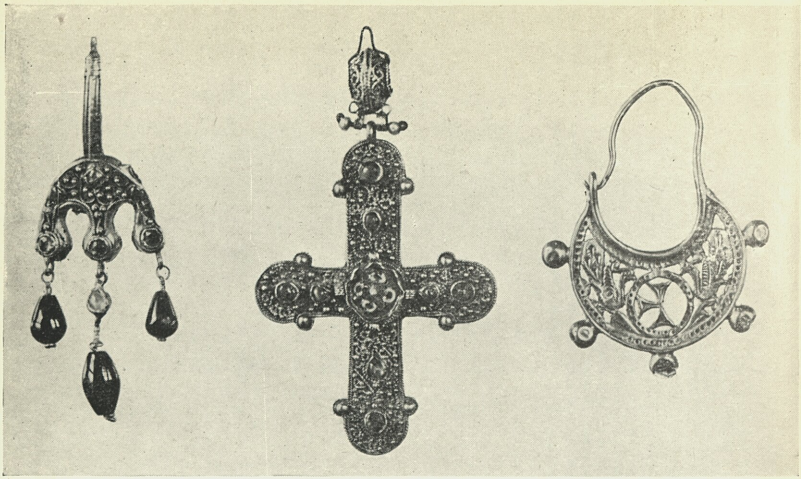
8A. [Panel, tapestry-woven. Egyptian, VIth century. 9¼in. x 7¼in. T.11–1945



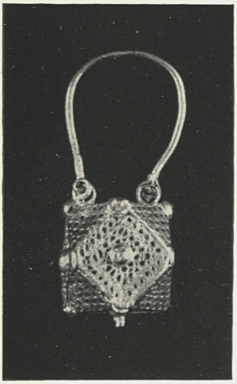
8B. Panel, tapestry-woven. Egyptian, Vth century. 13in. x 12in. 285A.–1891



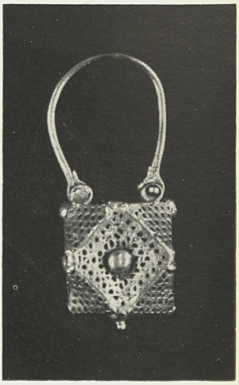
9. Panel from a Tunic ; silk. Syrian or Egyptian. VI-VIIth century. 10½in. sq.
558-1893



(*a*) (*b*) (*c*)





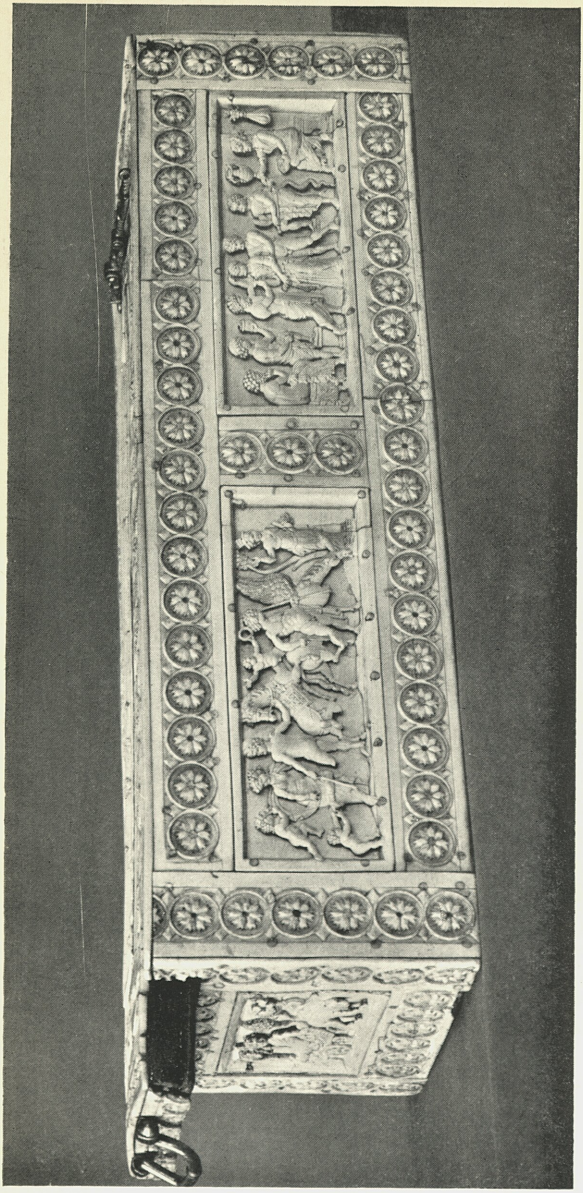


(*d*) (*e*) (*f*)

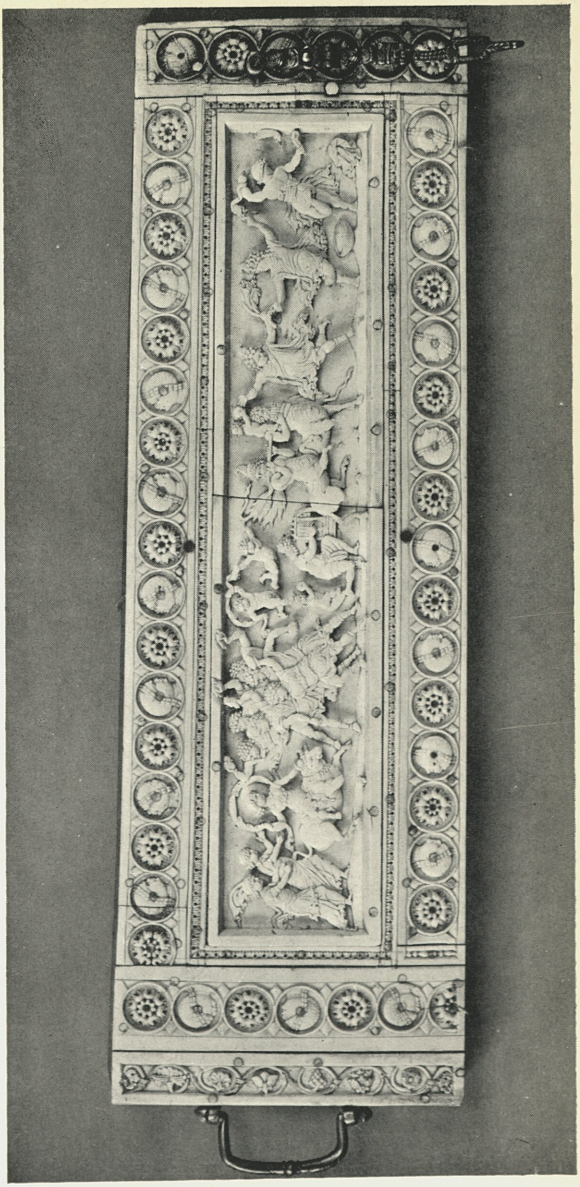
10. (*a*) Earring, gold set with emeralds and jacinths. H. 2⅝in. VIth century. 6570–1855
(*b*) Pendant Cross, gold filigree. VIth century. H. 2¾in. M.386–1911
(*c*) Earring, gold. H. 2 1/16in. VIth century. 805–1893
(*d*) and (*f*) Earrings, gold filigree. H. 1⅜in. M.556 & A.–1911
(*e*) Earring, silver. H. 2¼in. 807–1893



11. Plaque, jasper; the Crucifixion. Byzantine, Xth century. $2\frac{9}{16}$in. x $2\frac{3}{8}$in. A.77–1937



12. Ivory Casket; scenes from classical mythology. Byzantine, probably Xth century. 15¾in. x 6in. x 4½in. 216–1865



13. Detail ; the lid of No. 12.



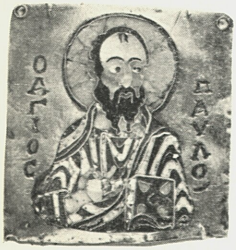
14. Silk; figure of an Emperor. Byzantine, VIIIth–IXth century. 20in. x 4in.
762–1893



15A. Enamel; head of Christ. Byzantine, XIth century. Diam. $\frac{3}{4}$in. M.71–1934



15B. Enamel plaque from the Crown of Constantine IX (1042–1054). Byzantine, XIth century. Diam. $7\frac{3}{4}$in. M.321–1921



15C. Enamel; head of St. Paul. Byzantine, XIth century. $1\frac{1}{4}$in. sq. 4910–1901



16. Fragment of Ivory Relief; the Virgin and Child. Byzantine, Xth century. 5in. x 1in. A.1–1912



17. Relief, green porphyry ; the Virgin Mary. Byzantine, XIth century.
Diam. 6¾in. A.1–1927



18. Repoussé copper plaque, from the Basilica at Torcello ; the Virgin and Child. Byzantine, *c.* 1200. 8⅜in. x 5½in. 818–1891



19. Ivory Statuette ; the Virgin and Child. Byzantine, XIth–XIIth century. H. 12¾in. 702—1884



20. Silk ; gryphon design. Byzantine, Xth–XIth century. 11in. x 9in.
764–1893

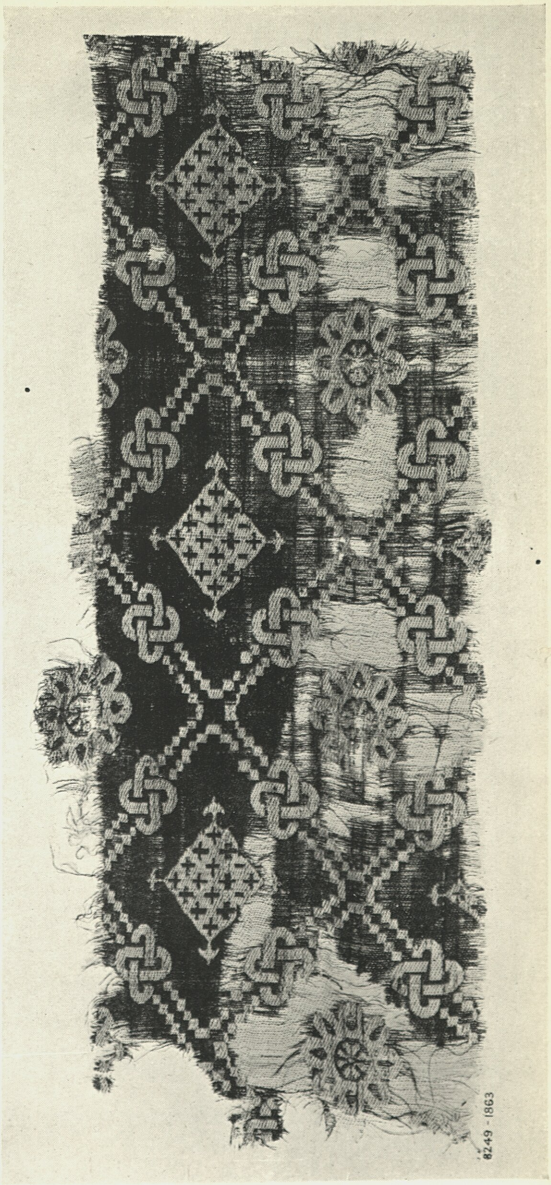


21. Ivory plaque ; figures of Saints. Byzantine, XIth–XIIth century. 9¼in. x 5¼in.

215–1866



22. Silk damask ; gryphon and leopard design. Byzantine, XIth–XIIth century. 24in. x 12in. 8233–1863



23. Silk ; lozenge design. Byzantine, XIth–XIIth century. 5in. x 12½in.

8249–1863



24. Ivory plaque ; The Last Judgment. Byzantine, XIth–XIIth century. 6in. x 8½in. A.24–1926



25. Triptych, gilt bronze ; the Virgin and Child with S. Gregory and S. John Chrysostom. Byzantine, XIth–XIIth century. 6⅜in. x 7¾in. 1615–1855



26. Miniature mosaic; the Annunciation. Byzantine, XIVth century. 5¼in. x 3¼in. 7321–1860



27. Embroidery, gold and silver on satin. Greek, dated 1587. From Salonica. 14in. sq. T.49–1932



28. Embroidery, gold and silver on satin. Greek, XVIIth–XVIIIth century.
H. 10½in., W. 12¾in. T.50–1932

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