Two decades ago, the art historian Thomas Mathews began research on paintings upon wood which he then termed “pagan icons”.¹ Nobody before him had studied these as a coherent group (13–14). Ranging in date from the first to the fourth century AD,² they survive almost exclusively from Egypt³ and depict Graeco-Roman or Egyptian deities.⁴ Mathews, the conservator Norman E. Muller, and the Egyptologist Vincent Rondot assembled a corpus of sixty specimens (240). Since Rondot chose to publish his findings separately, the volume under review complements his own.⁵ It should be noted that Mathews and Muller discuss five items which the French scholar ignored and ignore one which he studied (10).

The book’s thesis is that icons in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. panel paintings of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints, are but a version of the religious paintings traditionally used by polytheists in the Roman Empire. This idea was proposed by André Grabar⁶ and developed by Marguerite Rassart-Deberg, whose “courageous effort” Mathews and Muller acknowledge (14).⁷ A thorough survey of the Christian material from the sixth through eighth centuries (no earlier icons survive), much of which comes from Egypt,
would have permitted systematic comparisons. But such was not the authors’ task: “Since our study is primarily concerned with the precedents of Christian icons, we have made no effort to be complete in our citation of Byzantine and Coptic panel paintings” (13). The two prefer to pick out and trace individual lines of continuity: one such line involves painting technique (a), another, compositional devices (b), a third one, iconography (c), a fourth one, the cultic setting of images (d).

(a) Encaustic, in which the binding medium is wax, is traditionally considered the standard technique of Graeco-Roman painting on wood (Plin. nat. 35.31, 35.39, 35.41). In spite of this, all cultic panels that Muller could examine were demonstrably painted in tempera, the pigments having been intermixed not with wax but with egg, glue, or gum (224–229, 238–239). Given that egg tempera was the most common vehicle of medieval panel painting, Mathews and Muller argue for continuity between ancient and medieval artistic practice (21–22). “Byzantine artists were responsible for the transmission of the ancient technique to the Renaissance” (229). Perhaps the process was not as smooth as that, since sixth-century Byzantine icons (the oldest ones preserved) are generally executed in encaustic. Several of these are painted on thin boards reinforced with frames along the edge: in that respect they do resemble “pagan icons” (see for instance Mathews’ and Muller’s figs. 3–5 and 6.10, where the panels’ thickness is indicated in the image captions), yet their frames are constructed in a rather different manner (compare Mathews’ and Muller’s figs. 1.6, 1.18–21, 2.3, 2.7, 2.11, 3.310 with their fig. 4.911).

10 See also London, British Museum, 1889.1018.1; Providence, Rhode Island School of Design, 59.030.
11 See also Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine, icons no. 2 and 93.
(b) The authors observe similarity between the painted doors of Roman portable shrines (*naiskoi*) (figs. 3.9, 3.23, 3.28, 3.32‒35)\(^{12}\) and the side wings of Christian triptychs (figs. 3.29‒31).\(^{13}\) Unlike triptych wings, however, *naiskos* doors were only painted on the inside, while their back (outer) sides remained blank (115). Another compositional device that Christian icons are claimed to have inherited from their Romano-Egyptian forerunners is “the multi-register template of hierarchically sized figures” (120). I fail to see how this “template” – found on Apulian vases\(^{14}\) or Roman bas-reliefs\(^{15}\) – is peculiar to images of the ancient gods painted on wood.

(c) “The iconography of Christ was defined against the old imagery of Zeus, and the iconography of Mary against that of Isis” (24). The point about Christ is illustrated with the story of a fifth-century painter who dared to paint the Saviour in the likeness of Jupiter (193). The point about the Virgin is argued from the premise that “the parallel with Isis and Harpocrates [...] could hardly have gone unnoticed when the iconography of Mary was being formed” (166): both women are depicted enthroned (164), and the now-lost original of the famous *Hodegetria* icon might have shown Christ’s mother pointing at her own left breast, the way *Isis lactans* does (166). The authors tentatively claim certain clay figurines of pregnant women, found in Egypt, “as the first step toward an icon of Mary” (157).\(^{16}\)

(d) Finally, paintings of the ancient gods and Christian icons are argued to have both served as votive offerings (*dedicationes*, *votum*). Indeed, the dedicatory inscriptions on three pagan and two Christian panels (figs. 2.5‒2.9, 4.9, 7.3) attest their votive character.\(^{17}\) Through brilliant combination of documentary and physical evidence, a portrait of Emperor Septimius Severus

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12 See also Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, 74.AP.21 and 74.AP.22.
13 See also Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine, icons no. 325, 326, 496, 2.
15 E.g. the *Gemma Augustea* or, on a more modest scale, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 21.88.175. The latter object is reproduced in Mathews (above, n. 1) fig. 134.
with his family\textsuperscript{18} is shown to have likewise been an \textit{αἰώνιος} (74–83). Mathews and Muller explain that one could place offerings like these either in a temple or at home – most often in gratitude for having received divine assistance (68–69, 214). The second-century \textit{Acts of John} report that a thankful Christian had a likeness of the apostle painted for precisely this reason (131–134). Some six hundred years later, the dogmatic definition (\textit{καθολικὸς}) of the Seventh Ecumenical Council prescribes \textit{ἀναγόμενος ἐπὶ στήλης καὶ ἄγαθος ἀγάλματος}, which Mathews thoughtfully translates as “sacred and holy icons should be offered and dedicated” (211).

Mathews and Muller firmly argue against scholars who diminish the role of Christian images in the pre-medieval period.\textsuperscript{19} “Icons were intimately connected with the origins and growth of Christianity itself” (27). This is because several relatively early texts, such as the abovementioned \textit{Acts of John} and the \textit{Vità} of St Pachomius,\textsuperscript{20} discuss icons or icon-like visions (131–143). By the sixth century, icons have “come of age; they are now ready to be marshalled, arrayed, and programmed” (171). That is evident from “the most unstudied major monument in the entire history of Byzantine art” (172), viz., the reliefs on the silver \textit{templon} (chancel screen) of the Constantinopolitan cathedral of Hagia Sophia. The reliefs in question do not actually survive, but a sixth-century description (184) suggests they would have resembled ten marble ones excavated in the ruined substructure of what was once the Church of St Polyeuctus (figs. 6.6–6.9 and 6.11–6.18). Although these ten differ in technique and quality from all other marble decoration associated with this

\begin{footnotesize}

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Antikensammlung, \textit{31329}.
\item \textsuperscript{19} E. g. L. Brubaker: Icons before Iconoclasm? In: Morfologie sociali culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo. Spoleto 1998 (Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo 45), 1215–1254. Cf., however, the forthcoming paper by R. Price: Icons before and during Iconoclasm.
\end{enumerate}

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church, Mathews identifies them as part of its *templon*. No comparable *templon* images in marble are known from the sixth or seventh centuries, but then, a few wood-carvings, all found in Egypt, are assumed to have been inserted in chancel screens (38–41, 194–198). The evidence here, it must be admitted, is flimsy. Elisabet Enß quite reasonably interprets the very same carvings as *füllungsplatten* for doors or furniture. The panel, on the other hand, has clearly been re-used as a writing-board (three columns of Aramaic text cover the image), so in the context in which it was excavated, it no longer functioned as a painting — let alone as part of a *templon*. And if the Church of St Polyeuctus, known to have been built in the 520s, had images on its original chancel screen, how could the “concept of surrounding the altars with a circle of icons” have originated with St Eutychius (189), who was Patriarch of Constantinople in 552–562 and 577–582?

Whether icons had reached full “maturity” in the sixth century and whether they were then being placed on *templa*, are not crucial questions for the book as a whole. Nonetheless, the manner in which Mathews and Muller stretch the evidence to make it fit their argument brings to light, I think, a general weakness: they simply overstate their case that “Christian icon painting [...] stands squarely in the tradition of ancient art” (13). Pursued with unwavering single-mindedness (and with repeated reminders that everyone else either overlooked things or got them wrong), “continuity versus rupture” becomes a false dilemma. One thinks of the first-century Romans (Plin. *nat.* 35.2) who would hang up portraits of athletes in their exercise-room and a likeness of Epicurus in their bedchamber (134). Are those likely to have been painted?

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23 Paris, Musée du Louvre, AF 10878/79.


25 This is evident even from Mathews’ and Muller’s fig. 1.10, which like many other photographs in the book has been rescanned and is of substandard quality.
in tempera? To have been shaped like triptychs? Or to have resembled the icons corner in an Ukrainian peasant’s house (fig. 8.9)?

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