

‘Transnational’ Late Antiquity, ‘national’ modes of thought

Regarding (art) history, the term ‘transnational’ seems to be predominantly applied to 19th- and 20th-century as well as contemporary developments, such as the impact of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or contemporary processes of globalisation, mobility or migration.¹ Nevertheless, while there is no exact definition of what ‘transnational history’ is,² in the broad sense of the term ‘transnational’ defined by the [Merriam Webster](#) online dictionary as “extending or going beyond national boundaries,” the study of Late Antique and Byzantine Art (roughly late 3rd-15th century) has always been ‘transnational.’ Standard works on Byzantine art and architecture such as Richard Krautheimer’s *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (1965) discuss monuments located on three continents, in modern-day countries such as Italy, Greece, Serbia, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Turkey or Egypt, just to name a few. Similarly, introductory publications like *Art of the Byzantine Era* by David Talbot Rice (1963) include works that were created in- but also outside the boundaries of the Eastern Roman Empire (the core focus of Byzantine art), for example the art of Norman Sicily or medieval Bulgaria. Furthermore, since the gradual establishment of Late Antique studies as a separate discipline, the beginning of which is marked in the English-speaking world by the frequently cited [The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad](#) by Peter Brown (1971), the study of late antique (material) culture has become even more ‘transnational.’ As observed by [Anthony Kaldellis](#): “[e]xpanding almost imperially outward from its core (the later Roman Empire), the

¹ See, for example, Akira Iriye, “Transnational History,” *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 2 (May 2004): 211–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777304001675>; A major publication in the field of transnational history is: Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History: From the Mid-19th Century to the Present Day* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); For a detailed analysis of the Palgrave Dictionary, see: Ann-Christina L. Knudsen and Karen Gram-Skjoldager, “Historiography and Narration in Transnational History*,” *Journal of Global History* 9, no. 1 (March 2014): 143–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022813000533>; See also Corinna R. Unger, “Transnational History versus International History: A Case of Revisionism?,” in *The Humanities between Global Integration and Cultural Diversity*, ed. Birgit Mersmann and Hans G. Kippenberg, Concepts for the Study of Culture (CSC) 6 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 17–28; In the field of art history, see, for example: Clare Harris, “The Buddha Goes Global: Some Thoughts Towards a Transnational Art History,” *Art History* 29, no. 4 (2006): 698–720, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2006.00520.x>; Burcu Dogramaci, “Migrant, Nomad, Traveler – Towards a Transnational Art History,” in *The Humanities between Global Integration and Cultural Diversity*, ed. Birgit Mersmann and Hans G. Kippenberg, Concepts for the Study of Culture (CSC) 6 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 50–69; See also Matthew Rampley et al., eds., *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 4 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012); Carmen Victor, “Transnational Voices in National Art Histories,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 43, no. 1 (2021): 212–16.

² Knudsen and Gram-Skjoldager, “Historiography and Narration in Transnational History*,” 145–46; Unger, “Transnational History versus International History: A Case of Revisionism?,” 21.

discipline of late antiquity sought to break down boundaries separating classical, early Christian, Patristic, early medieval, Byzantine, Jewish, Syriac, and early Islamic studies. (...) It offered the advantage of viewing this larger world as an interconnected unit, tracing trends across languages and former disciplinary breaks.”³

Furthermore, while Burcu Dogramaci argues for “an understanding of art history as a history of movement,” considering the mobility of artists and their subjects in respect to contemporary art,⁴ these are aspects that are equally relevant for earlier periods. Late antique iconographies and motifs themselves can be inherently mobile and ‘transnational,’ as is the case of the image of Ktisis, personification of foundation. She is often depicted as a bejewelled young woman and can only be identified via a Greek name label next to her head, for example as in a 6th-century floor mosaic now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (MET) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Fragment of a Floor Mosaic with a Personification of Ktisis, 500–550, with modern restoration, 151.1 x 199.7 x 2.5 cm. [New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.](https://www.metmuseum.org/press/2015/09/1511x1997x25cm)

While the exact place of origin of the MET mosaic is unknown, the depicted personification appears in at least fourteen further settings on two continents: Late Antique mosaics with this personification were discovered in modern-day Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Libya and

³ Anthony Kaldellis, “Late Antiquity Dissolves,” *Marginalia*, September 18, 2015, <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/late-antiquity-dissolves-by-anthony-kaldellis/>.

⁴ Dogramaci, “Migrant, Nomad, Traveler – Towards a Transnational Art History,” 67.

Lebanon. Moreover, over 90 similar depictions of Late Antique and Byzantine personifications of abstract ideas (such as ‘foundation,’ ‘enjoyment,’ ‘luxury,’ ‘wisdom’ etc.) were found in several modern-day countries on the coasts of the Eastern Mediterranean (Fig. 2).

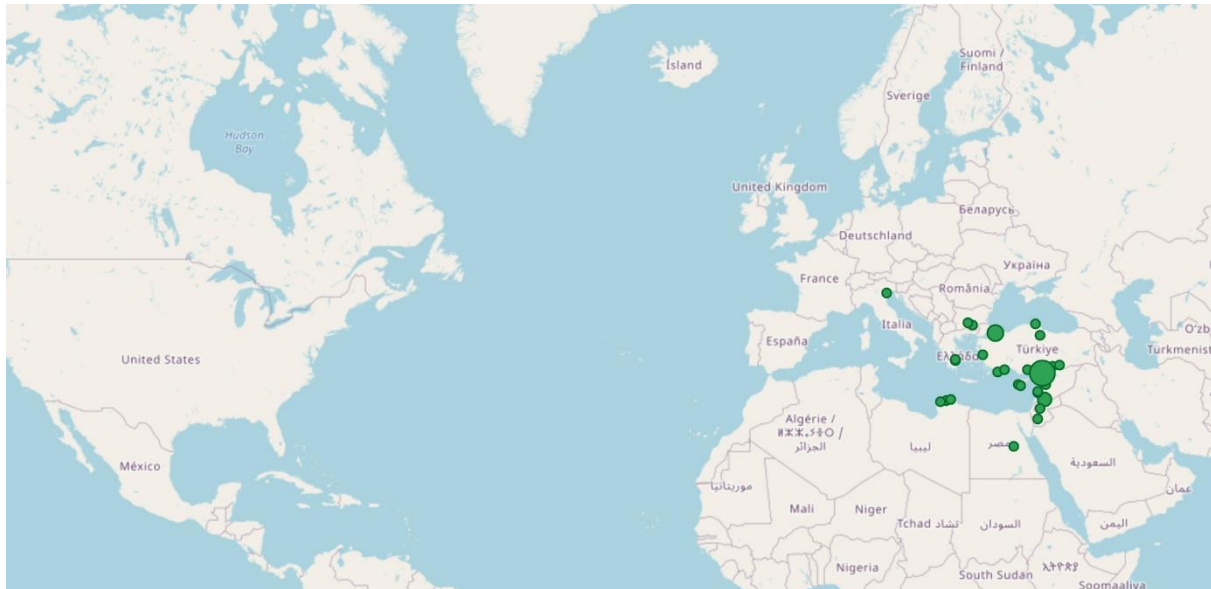


Fig. 2 Late antique and Middle Byzantine objects featuring depictions of personifications of abstract ideas identified via a Greek name label: sites of (probable) origin (map created via recogito.pelagios.org)

Today these artifacts are scattered in multiple locations: some are *in situ* or in local museums, but many, including mobile objects like textiles and jewellery, belong to various collections in Europe and North America (Fig. 3). Moreover, the map in Fig. 3 may give a rough idea of the wide range of locations where Late Antique and Byzantine artifacts are now kept and the issues mentioned below will be concerning this type of material in general. The large number of floor mosaics excavated in the 1930s in ancient Antioch (modern day Antakya in southern Turkey) are a good example for the dispersal of this type of material. As Claudia Barsanti has demonstrated in an [article from 2012](#), floor mosaics that once decorated a single house are now in numerous collections while multiple museums divide between themselves even the floor of a single room. For instance, mosaic fragments from the so called ‘House of the Boat of Psyches’ dated to the late 3rd century CE are now kept in Antakya, Paris, Baltimore, Princeton, and Philadelphia.⁵

⁵ Claudia Barsanti, “The Fate of the Antioch Mosaic Pavements: Some Reflections,” *Uludag University Journal of Mosaic Research* 5 (2012): 25–42.

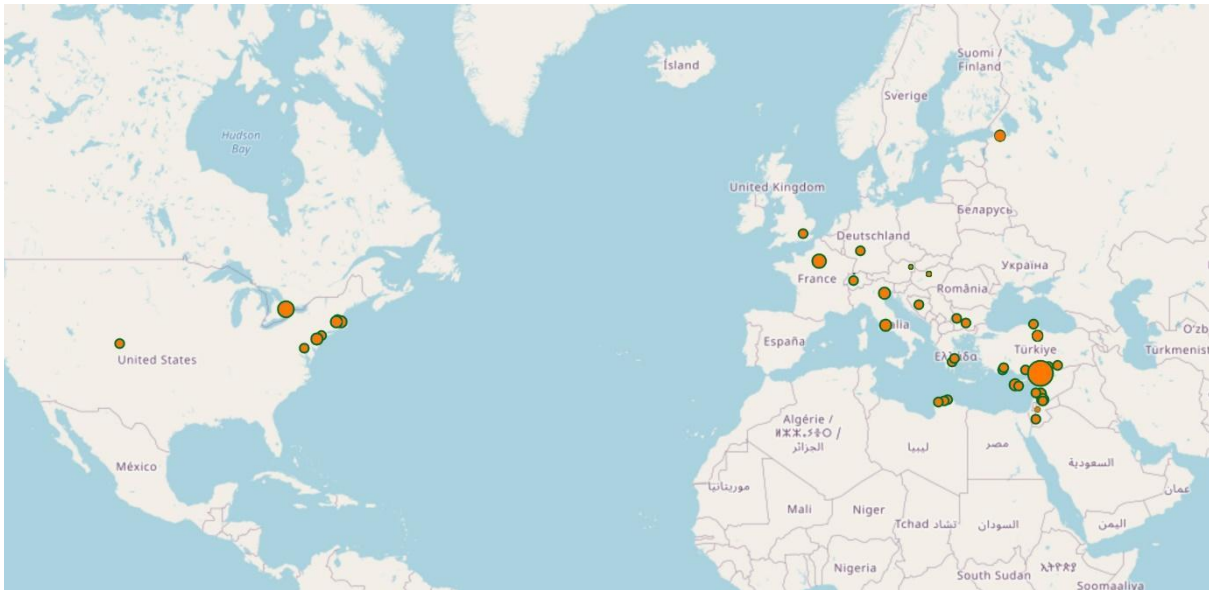


Fig. 3 Late antique and Middle Byzantine objects featuring depictions of personifications of abstract ideas identified via a Greek name label: current location, when known (map created via recogito.pelagios.org)

Thus, the ‘transnationality’ of images such as this occurs on two levels: first, in respect of their country of origin and second, in respect of their current location. Analysing these artifacts as a group often requires a ‘transnational’ approach, i.e., going beyond the national boundaries of the modern countries they were found in as well as of the countries they are now located in.

Nevertheless, the presence of the ‘national’ cannot always be easily overcome. First, it is felt in nationally oriented (and often still much needed) publications such as [Corpus der Spätantiken und Frühchristlichen Mosaiken Bulgariens \(2016\)](#) or Michele Piccirillo’s [The Mosaics of Jordan](#), which are geographically limited by modern-day state borders. This does not necessarily do justice to the premodern cultural and geographical spheres within which this type of material originated. Secondly, the ‘national’ is also present in the (supposedly) ‘transnational’ digital space. While some of the museums housing such artifacts have digitized their collections and made them freely accessible online, others have not, which ultimately makes some objects (and museums) more visible and thus easier to find and study than others and poses a challenge when researching objects belonging to the same original context but dispersed in different collections. The state of digitization of a museum’s holdings can also differ depending on country. While the leading museums in the English-speaking world such as the [British Museum](#) in London or the [Metropolitan Museum](#)

[of Art](#) in New York have been employing digital strategies for decades⁶ and offer extensive searchable online catalogues of their holdings, museums in other parts of the world still need to catch up. This can be problematic when researching Late Antique and Byzantine material since major museums with Late Antique and Byzantine collections, such as the [Museo dell'alto Medioevo](#) in Rome or the [Bargello](#) in Florence (Italy), as well as some smaller, specialized museums, such as the [Ikonenmuseum Recklinghausen](#) (Germany), housing a large collection of Byzantine icons, do not offer searchable online catalogues. As recently as 2018 [a survey by the Deutsches Museumsbund](#) found that German regional museums have digitized their collections often inadequately and only partially and that they lack the necessary resources, trained personnel and a long-term digital strategy.⁷ If this is true for a country like Germany, the same could be assumed for museums in less wealthy European countries (for example, I cannot think of a single Bulgarian museum, which has a searchable online collection of its holdings). This demonstrates the importance of other professional online images/object resources, such as the digitized collections of art-historical and archaeological research institutes (e.g., [Bibliotheca Hertziana](#), [Arachne](#)) or cooperative projects between multiple institutions or countries (e.g., [Bildindex der Kunst & Architektur](#)). However, the presence of the 'national' manifests itself when using both types of online repositories in practice. While, for example, some German and Austrian museums and databases such as the [Staatliche Museen zu Berlin](#), the [Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien](#), or the digital [Photo Library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz](#) allow for searching their online collections in languages other than German, there are significant discrepancies in the number of provided results based on language with German remaining the most practical (or only) one to use. The presence of the 'national' can also be directly observed on perhaps one of the most prominent international online databases for cultural heritage in Europe, [Europeana](#), which gives access to over 50 million documents of all kinds of culturally relevant material provided by approximately 4000 institutions from most countries in Europe as well as the USA and Israel.⁸ While it shows similar language discrepancies as the

⁶ See, for example, "Metropolitan Museum Launches New and Expanded Web Site," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 25, 2000, <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2000/metropolitan-museum-launches-new-and-expanded-web-site>.

⁷ "Digitalisierung," *Deutscher Museumsbund e. V. - Bulletin* 3 (2018): 12.

⁸ See also, "Europeana Pro - Our Mission," Europeana Pro, November 12, 2020, <https://pro.europeana.eu/about-us/mission>.

above mentioned repositories (i.e., metadata records exist in multiple languages but these do not seem to be translated), a further 'national' element is the search filter "Providing country," i.e., the country of the cultural institution sharing the image (or other type of document). However, there are no similar filters regarding the place of origin of the depicted (or otherwise discussed) artifacts, their place of current location, or other filters referring to nomenclatures regarding culture or history.

These and further shortcomings, both on the level of structure and on the level of recorded metadata, make researching Late Antique and Byzantine material on such repositories challenging and still dependent on 'national' practices and modes of thought. On this background, Antonella Sbrilli's almost ten-year-old claim that "digital tools and environments have been proving their capabilities in meeting at least one of the deepest ambitions of art history: to connect artworks to a net of different and evolving interwoven relations" seems rather optimistic.⁹ [Linked Open Data](#) strategies still need more systematic and much wider practical implementation to overcome both institutional and national boundaries.

Some aspects of this blog post were presented at the [Annual HI PhD Conference on 19 February 2021](#). Recording of the conference are available as a [podcast](#).

For detailed discussion, see "Trace the Untraceable: Online Image Search Tools for Researching Late Antique Art" *Heritage* 4, no. 4 (2021): 4076-4104. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage4040225>.

⁹ Antonella Sbrilli, "Computerization, Digitization and the Internet," in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, ed. Matthew Rampley et al., Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 4 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 137.

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