

Byzantium in “Africa”

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Supplementary Online Figures

Africa and Byzantium, curated by Andrea Myers Achi. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 19 November 2023–3 March 2024.

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A major exhibition displacing Europe as the engine that shaped global Christianity is a moment to savor. *Africa and Byzantium* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met)¹ presented northern Africa as a sophisticated and equal partner in the fabrication of visual status in late antiquity instead of as it has customarily been seen, as a derivative province in the Roman world. It drew a general public's attention to the constitutive role played by lands south of the Mediterranean in the production and circulation of luxury goods, and, through them, in the promulgation of early Christianity.

The show opened with a mosaic on loan from the Louvre, haunting and otherworldly in its incompleteness, showing men of different complexions and hairstyles preparing for a banquet (fig. 1).² The subtle modulation of skin tone through shifts in colors of layered tesserae show that the artist was accustomed to and adept at rendering a variety of flesh tones (fig. 2). Further, the choice of this object as the opener revealed the central concerns and issues of the exhibition. It is from Carthage, which had been controlled by rulers based in Rome for several centuries when it was made in the second century CE, more than 100 years before there existed anything that can be understood as “Byzantium.”³

Medievalists understand “Byzantium” as the eastern Roman empire, centered around the city of Constantinople, formerly called Byzantium and eponymously renamed after the first Christian Roman emperor (Constantine) in 330 CE; it endured until the conquest of that city by the Ottomans

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¹ After New York, the exhibition traveled to the Cleveland Museum of Art and was open from 14 April to 21 July 2024.

² Mosaic with Preparations for a Feast, 175–200 CE. Paris, Musée du Louvre MNC 1577, acq. 1891; found near Carthage, 1875; purchased by the French state from Guer Model in 1891. Figures herein are the author's except as otherwise noted. Supplementary online figures are available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/733893>.

³ The introductory label acknowledged the murky nature of the terminology: “The vibrant and inspiring art displayed throughout, culminating with a group of contemporary works, brings alive themes of translation, circulation, and memory, raising critical questions about where and when Byzantium ‘ends.’”