

**The statuary collection held at the baths of Zeuxippus (Ap 2) and the search for  
Constantine's museological intentions**

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5 Constantine intended to portrait his very own Constantinople as the new (third) Troy,  
the most complete portrait of Greek and Roman [paidea] paideia. He and his team had no  
more than six years to redesign and rebuilt an entire city, the old Byzantium; plastic  
arts, mainly sculpture, played an important role in the entire public process. Looking  
10 once again at the archaeological remains of the statuary collection held at the baths  
of Zeuxippus, in relation to their literary description by Christodoros (Greek  
*Anthology II*), the present paper essays a museological reading of these statues as part  
of the global architectural plan of Constantine for his own new capital of the  
Imperium.

15 **1. Remodelling and adorning Constantinople**

"Dedicatur Constantinopolis omnium paene urbium nuditate". It was with these words,  
without mentioning any other political events, that Jerome chose to refer to the  
foundation of Constantinople. Scholars have agreed on reading this *nudity* as the look  
of the cities that, under Constantine's command, saw their most precious sculptural  
20 works of art being taken to the newly found capital of the Empire. Nevertheless, one  
must notice that Jerome talks about *nuditate* (the substantive), not simply about  
*denuding* (any verbal form) the conquered cities. That is why I shall propose the  
possibility of a different reading: that Jerome had in mind, with such a choice of  
wording, an intentional ambiguity: certainly he refers to the act of denuding other  
25 cities to adorn Constantinople, but he also implies to the use of these cities' own  
*nudity* (their pagan statues) to *dress up* the new capital, thus giving the latter an  
overall look of somehow sinful *nudity*, inevitably a characteristic of a whore.

Archaeology and several Christian authors, like Eusebius, have shown - thus giving  
30 credit to the view of a truly magnificent Constantinople already portrayed since the  
Renaissance - that Constantinople, by the time of its official dedication in 330, was  
everything but a naked city. Furthermore, it was probably not naked even before  
Constantine's conquest; dressed up enough, at least, for the new Emperor to see in it,  
in its already existing (and potential) *romanitas*, as Basset puts it, "a springboard  
35 for the implementation of [his own] urban vision, probably as a result of the changes  
already made during the previous Severan government. Indeed, scholars are now sure of  
the magnificent buildings and streets of Constantine's Constantinople, all of these  
spaces adorned with the most exquisite and rare statuary, in different dimensions and  
positions, always intriguing the passer-by with both its beauty and its meaning. Such  
40 was the city, very close to the one portrayed by Eusebius, a space of architectural  
and sculptural ποικιλία (*varietas*), one of the most identifying traces of the new  
Byzantine taste; a completely different and, as Basset writes, "newly outfitted urban  
core of monumental architecture and sculpture".

45 In the course of my paper, by the reanalysis of the archaeological, iconographical and  
literary data, I shall approach what I think is the possible museological reading of  
the collection of statues held at the Baths of Zeuxippus, following an interpretation  
already implicit in several scholars, as recently in the book of Yegül who, talking  
about the Zeuxippus, called it "a veritable museum of classical art", the exact same  
50 words already used by Stanley Casson when publishing the second report of the  
excavations performed on the site. I therefore shall put together the evidence of what  
must have been a very Constantinian intention - the elaboration of a project, both  
public and urban, of a great exhibition of statuary, itself formed by several minor  
collections. More than the "intention of the collectors to display objects of artJ  
55 (Saradi-Mendelovici), already noticed and studied by scholars, I shall pursue the very  
steps of the creation of an art collection with political and propagandistic purposes,  
the means and the ends of what must have been one of Constantinople's greatest national  
galleries, even if it held works of art that were in no way national.

60 By now, a first evidence takes us a step closer to the reading we are looking for: the  
remodelling and the provision with true art galleries of an entire city in just six

years, which could not have happened without a detailed, coherent and well-organised plan. Constantine and his collaborators set afoot a wide plan (both architectural and museological) of transformation of a city in which they saw potential enough to become  
65 a urban and public museum of Greek, Roman and Hellenistic sculpture; a project that was only possible in a city (the pre-Constantinian Byzantium) that already counted several  
art galleries in itself, spaces that required remodelling - as any room or museum  
nowadays still does, especially when the exhibition's importance demands it - in order  
70 to accommodate several minor exhibitions that formed the huge National Identity Museum that was Constantinople in its entirety.

If Rome was the huge urban museum that it was, due to centuries of art accumulation, the Severan Byzantium that Constantine finally conquered in 324 was no Rome. The new city's artistic *spolia* weren't no longer to be collected during decades, as the result of  
75 military victories; they had to be identified, selected, collected, transported and only then exhibited in their new public galleries - and time was limited. Even if different from the primordial *spolia*, at the end of the day they kept their original meaning, as they were still an immediate and meaningful manifestation of imperial power and domination. Much work was required in only six years. Sozomen, in the fifth  
80 century, actually says that Constantine had to impose taxes to cover the expenses of building and adorning the city. Nevertheless, the Museum was ready to be seen in May 330, with every single stage of its curacy carefully performed. For the moment, let us make a tour of its major buildings and art collection.

## 85 2. The Zeuxippus, a special art gallery

Part of the Emperor's first great architectural plan consisted of remodelling or constructing from the ground up five buildings that soon became the major symbols of his power and urban plan: the Augusteion, the Basilica, the Hippodrome, the Great  
90 Palace and the Baths of Zeuxippus. They were all public buildings in the neuralgic centre of the city; all of them well connected by wide streets where circulation was easy, the postcard picture of visitation that Constantine wanted for his city. But they were also the main spaces where, by means of sculptural exhibitions and their very architectural grandeur, a new imperial image of power (of Roman imperial power) should be reflected, a wide-ranging look of *romanitas*.

95 The Baths of Zeuxippus along with the Hippodrome and the Great Palace, were one of the three sites where such *romanitas* soon became more evident. Nothing more Roman, everyone agrees, than a public bath-gymnasium and a space for athletic competitions (as the Hippodrome was), even if these activities were not the only ones having place in these  
100 buildings. Constantine had already ordered the building of such a complex in Rome, named after himself; but the new capital of the Empire, his major personal achievement, should have its own. From the eight great thermal complexes identified by the *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae* in the mid-fifth century - apart from the 153 smaller bathing places (*balneae*) - the Zeuxippus was certainly the most important and the one  
105 more intimately connected with the will of Constantine himself. In spite of its achievements, archaeological excavations held in place between 1927-1929 were not able to provide a very detailed plan of the inside organization of the building. Nevertheless, later excavations *in situ* unveiled other buildings of the same complex, among which there was a cistern, and provided more data for a better understanding of  
110 the building and its functions.

Picture 1: Constantinople center around the Great Palace, the Hippodrome and Saint Sophia  
[Adapted from Müller-Wiener and Mango].



precious sculptures brought from abroad, both in bronze and marble, were to be displayed all-along the building, inside and outside of it. Therefore, one may already distinguish two policies for display, both traditional and part of Constantine's project; one more monumental and public, meant to be a part of the user's routine - which somehow took the outer communitarian space into the inner spaces of the Baths -, alongside another one, more concentrated and possible to organise thematically, chronologically or even artistically, probably meant for more exclusive visitors; this might occupy several smaller rooms.

The reputation of the Zeuxippus is due mainly to the poetic description of some of its statues, a poem in 416 hexametres by Christodoros that was transmitted to us as book 2 of the *Greek Anthology*. Presenting in all manuscripts of the *Anthology* the epigraph Έκφρασις των ἀγαλμάτων των εἰς το δημόσιον γυμνάσιον του ἐπικαλουμένου Ζευξιππου, the poem describes eighty statues or statue-groups, from the much larger collection that was possible to see in the Baths. Scholars have been divided on their approaches to the relations between the poem and the statues themselves, giving more or less credit to the truth of their description and to the words of Christodoros. Indeed, it is datable in the first years of the sixth century, under the government (and probable commission) of Anastasius, mentioned in lines 403-404. Archaeology has shown that Christodoros worked upon a real collection of sculptures, even if we are forced to believe that it was no longer the same collection prepared by Constantine, at least 170 years before. Among other remains, excavations unveiled three base-statues, two of which had inscribed the names of Hecuba (Base B) and Aeschynes (Base C), characters whose statues are described in the [Ekphrasis](#), respectively in lines 175-178 and 14-17.

The very re-appreciation of these bases will soon provide us new arguments on the reading we are following. First, the bases must be placed somewhere in the fifth century. Therefore, they are posterior to Constantine, i.e., they were very probably not part of the original exhibition in 330, "when Roman square bases were more common" (Casson); on the other hand, being previous to the time of Christodoros, it is highly possible that he saw them when composing his poem. This hints at the constant remodelling of the exhibitions inside the Zeuxippus, something that receives further confirmation in the holes found in Bases A and B, enough to prove that each base must have supported at least two different statues and allowing the possibility of the existence of temporary exhibitions. We must accept the idea of an open gallery, even several open and multipurpose galleries, being constantly reformed. And this is different from the simple accumulation of statues, as the result of military *spolia*, for instance; the archaeological data we now have support that idea that, in the Zeuxippus, statues were moved and frequently added to the collection also as a response to museological or artistic concerns.

In spite of the (few) spatial indications provided by Christodoros and the intricate attempts of reconstructing the order of the statues by some scholars, we are actually unable to reconstruct the look of the sculptural exhibitions in the Zeuxippus. Nevertheless, it seems that Christodoros follows somewhat linear order, and that is why we give credit to the opinion of Bassett, when arguing for the *Ekphrasis* as a description of the statues exhibited in the *frigidarium*, which was, indeed, "the showpiece of any Imperial establishment". There, statues could stand at ground level - and that was Stupperich's biggest mistake, to assume that every sculpture was displayed this way -, but also in open spaces (like halls and corridors) or niches and *aediculae*, in the best architectural tradition of similar buildings found everywhere throughout the Roman Empire. The room on which Christodoros focused, and with it the entire complex, would have such a *poikiliakos* aspect, as *poikiliakos* was the poem that describes it with such creative versification. Once again, the three bases, contemporary as they are, can afford some confirmation. Base C (the "Aeschynes' base) is smaller (height 1,35m; shaft 58cm) than Bases A and B (height 1,40m diameter 1,08m; shaft 83cm), but its inscription presents the same lettering than Base B, which suggests that they were part of a same gallery purpose. With all this evidence, Bassett seems to be correct when arguing that "a concerted effort was made to provide a homogenous display" and that "presumably all of the bases in the collection were round". If so, even if the inner structures of the building were also used to exhibit

(its niches, its corners, its halls), one may accept the idea that the very conception of these bases was part of a museological plan.

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Yet another question requires an answer as we *revisit* the Zeuxippus sculpture gallery: the medium in which these works were sculpted. Christodoros, in the fifth century, persistently mentions bronze (with *chalkon* and derivative forms), and archaeologists actually detected remains of such material in the uncovered bases of the statues (Casson); in the sixth century, Malalas says that Constantine adorned the Zeuxippus "with variegated marbles and statues of bronze" (*κοσμήσας κίοσι και μαρμάρους ποικίλοις και χαλκουργήμασιν*) and colourful marble seem to be mentioned not as medium of the sculptures but as covering the walls and floor of the building. On the other hand, in the twelfth century, [Cedrenus](#) provides another description of the complex, mentioning, "many painted marvels and well-made splendours of marble, stone and mosaic, as well as bronze images that were the work of ancient men" (*ποικίλη τις ήν θεωρία και λαμπρότης τεχνων, των τε μαρμάρων και λίθων και ψηφίδων και εικόνων δια χαλκου πεποιημένων των άπ' αίωνος ανδρων έργα*) but also this author is unclear on the media of the statues. Nevertheless, nothing undeniably supports Christodoros' exclusive references to bronze as the medium of the collection. Once again, we face the limits of the reading of the *Ekphrasis*. Is Christodoros working upon a single gallery, probably the one at the *frigidarium*? Or is he arbitrarily focusing on some statues he sees when walking through the Bath? Once more, archaeology provides a possible answer.

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The main artefact recovered in the site of the Baths that can directly be connected with the museological plan of Constantine is a fragment of the face of a colossal female statue or bust, which is nowadays lost but we are told it was found "among the debris at the very bottom level" (Casson et alii). Because of that, the report of the second excavation already stated that the marble fragment "derived from a statue which once stood in the baths, quite probably one of the early Greek statues looted from Athens by one of the first Emperors of the fourth or fifth century A.D." Even if a direct relation to Constantine is unsafe, we obtain confirmation for another characteristic of the exhibitions in the Zeuxippus: there were, in the same space, statues of marble and bronze, from the very beginnings of the building as a public bath and a art museum.

### 3. Masterpieces at the Zeuxippus (the possible guided tour)

The fragment of a colossal head we are looking at is also the best proof available to confirm the practice of importing sculpture to Constantinople from the very first years of its foundation. As mentioned before, Constantine's use of sculptural *spolia* is to be understood differently, since it was part of a detailed plan to provide the city with some of the greatest masterpieces of both Greek and Roman culture. From now on we shall look at some examples of sculptures we know, mostly from Christodoros' account, to have been displayed at the Zeuxippus. Samples of true antique sculpture, that at least is how the inhabitants would have looked at them - brought from several parts of the Empire. One must also keep in mind the common use, at the time, of copies, some of them ordered for a specific building, a practice that, besides not being a sign of bad taste, must have had its own market.

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Archaeological interventions at the site of the Zeuxippus, apart from the aforementioned fragment of a colossal head, have not been able to uncover any complete or even partial statue that might have been displayed in the Baths. Nevertheless, the better-known history of other famous sculptures and their presence in the galleries of Constantinople allow us to imagine that no less important works of art must have stood in the rooms of the Zeuxippus, at first as the result of Constantine's museological plan. One single example would be enough: the eleventh century historian Kedrenos records a tradition according to which the fifth-century chryselephantine statue of Zeus, the work of Pheidias first exhibited in the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, was carried off to Constantinople, most probably in the years of the preparation of the city for the official dedication, where it was displayed at the Palace of Lausus, another building renowned for the vast and rich collection of statues housed within its walls.

270 As for the Zeuxippus collection, the most recent and complete essay on listing the  
sculptures displayed is the one by Bassett 2004. When working on the Zeuxippus, Bassett  
does it probably in the only way possible, i.e. from the list of statues and sculptural  
groups given in the *Ekphrasis*. But the poem, in spite of the aforementioned persistent  
275 indication of bronze and other indirect information, says nothing on the statues'  
provenance, antiquity or authorship. In face of such a lack of information, both  
literary and archaeological, the only way to forward is the way of moderate imagination  
and comparison with known sculptural models of each character, when such a work is  
possible. And some interesting identifications have been made or suggested. I give here  
two examples, and dare to make a suggestion. Richter 1965, for instance, thought that  
280 the statue of Sappho described between lines 69-71 of the *Ekphrasis* could be an  
original brought from Lesbos, not necessarily from the classical period, since  
Christodoros mentions the poetess as a seated female figure, an image frequent in coins  
found at Mytilene, from the second century AD. In another example, all the three  
descriptions of statues of Aphrodite (lines 78-81, 99-101, 288-290) fit the model of a  
285 series of half-draped fourth century BC representations of the goddess, as the so-  
called Aphrodite (or Venus) d'Arles, a first-century BC marble sculpture now at the  
Louvre that is thought to be a copy of the Aphrodite of Thespieae of Praxiteles, a work  
from his early career in the 360s BC that could also resemble the model of the so-  
called *Cnidia Baldevere*, nowadays in the Vatican Museum (N° inv. 4260). Scholars have  
for long noticed this resemblance, but I suggest what seems to me a strong possibility,  
290 that the statue standing at the Zeuxippus may have been the original fourth century BC  
sculpture by Praxiteles. Besides Pausanias' (second century AD) mention of having  
viewed the statue at Thespieae in Boeotia, as part of a group made up of Cupid, Phryne  
and Aphrodite, nothing else is known about its destination. Therefore, if we only  
remember that in the latter years of the fourth century Theodosius II brought the  
295 Aphrodite of Cnidos of the same Praxiteles to his court in Lausus it is not hard at all  
to suspect that Constantine himself or any other emperor after him might have brought  
to the city this other Praxitelean work.

#### 4. A thematic gallery on national identity?

300 Such as the Zeuxippus in terms of statuary. As for Christodoros' poem - which in  
selecting its characters seems to obey above all artistic, poetic and commissioning  
interests - it mentions and describes figures from the following main categories:  
mythical characters that participated in the Trojan War (25), mythical characters not  
part of the Trojan conflict (6), mythical prophets or seers (8), male and female  
305 divinities (11), poets and other writers (16), philosophers (7), political men and  
other public characters (7) and athletes (3). If the collection prepared by Constantine  
might not have had the very same statues, as said before, Christodoros' account is  
still useful for providing a sample of a collection with an intention akin to those of  
Constantine. Indeed, it makes sense that some of the ideological purposes where the  
310 same.

The large amount of statues portraying mythical heroes from the Trojan war, 25 (29 in  
other authors' account), led Stupperich 1982 to develop his very polemic theory that  
the *Ekphrasis* was mostly a bronze [Ilioupersis](#) - indeed, the most part of the  
315 characters are described as being in a miserable situation, close to or as result of  
the fall of the city; and that the Emperor himself had wanted to present Constantinople  
as the new Troy, the third, after Rome. Furthermore, Stupperich's paper actually reads  
the Trojan iconography at the Zeuxippus as Constantine's intention, arguing, among  
other things, from three literary testimonies that mention Constantine's first thought  
320 of founding his new capital in Troy (or at a nearby location in Troad).

In general, even if it remains impossible to determine how far the mythical (Trojan and  
non-Trojan) statues described by Christodoros in the late-fifth or early-sixth century  
were part of Constantine's inaugural collection, I think it might be assumed that this  
325 original collection was composed mostly with mythical characters, models of virtue,  
happiness and even learning from pain, all of them derived from the very best  
characters of ancient Greek-roman culture. On the other hand, it is also easy to  
understand that the portraits and freestanding statues of political and more  
contemporary figures were later added to the collection, as the result of successive

330 individual or group dedications. Yet, when thinking about its origins, the exhibition  
 had to reflect, as well said by Bassett, the "desire to detach Constantinopolitan  
 identity from the confining agenda of local history and link it with the universal  
 cultural traditions of Greece and Rome". Myth, music, poetry, rhetoric, politics and  
 even sports, those were the bases that Constantine wanted as the new Christian Empire's  
 335 *paideia*. Constantine needed to provide his people with a plastic sample of this *paideia*  
 within the walls of the Zeuxippus and other Constantinoplan public places. And so these  
 places became museums of art, but also museums of (yet unspoken) very meaningful words  
 (apud Bär 2012), where pagan gods and seers were meant to transmit a message not to be  
 the object of any kind of cult. In 382, merely 50 years after the official inauguration  
 340 of Constantinople, an imperial decree from Teododius I, referring to a certain temple  
 at Osrhoene in Mesopotamia [=Edessa, now Şanlıurfa, Turkey], commands the local  
 authorities to keep it open so that the inhabitants may enjoy its precious gallery of  
 statues. The text of the decree is clear on saying that the statues were brought to the  
 temple more "artis pretio quam divinitate", a phrase unequivocal in relation to the  
 345 purely artistic importance ascribed to these collections of statuary.

The urban project prepared for the new capital, in spite of the Christian tradition  
 surrounding the foundation that gained voice after it took place, insisting on seeing  
 it as the *naked luxuriant whore* possibly implied by Jerome; it was not permeable to (or  
 350 at least not defined by) the ideological demands of the new official religion of the  
 Empire. Far from being intimidated by the popular beliefs of the pagan statues as  
 containing evil demons one may actually think that even that must have created an aura  
 of mysticism favourable to the existence and keeping of the statues themselves. In  
 other words, as recently concluded by Elsner, "the very re-appropriation and  
 355 redeployment into private collections of these objects, many with pagan themes, helped  
 to neutralize their religious value to a sort of antiquarian chic which was hardly in  
 opposition to the new Christianising tendency." On the other hand, as postulated by  
 James, pagan statues were the medium of a paradox that is no more than apparent: they  
 are intentionally used by Constantine (and by the emperors after him) as a means to  
 360 unify an officially Christian empire. And such a fact proves how far the inhabitants  
 accepted these works of art as part of their daily-life, their collective and more  
 immediate culture.

A last plausible interrogation, in relation to Constantine's artistic agenda, may come  
 365 from a literary and performative enquiry on the *Ekphrasis*. The poem, with regard to its  
 context of production, commission and much-probable performance - and if it was not for  
 its literary value - could fit in the same group of texts such as the so-called  
 Παραστάσεις ὑντομοὶ χρονικά... ("Brief Historical Expositions"), a confusing little  
 370 Constantinoplan topography and monuments, mainly its statues and their mystic  
 relation to the inhabitants. More than revealing the Byzantines' distrust of classical  
 statues, this book (and others like it) is to be interpreted, if not as a kind of  
 tourist's guidebook to the curiosities of Constantinople (Mango), at least as having  
 been compiled also from such guidebooks, among the several and very distinct sources  
 375 most certainly implied in its composition.

As James writes, "statues were perceived on both the intellectual and popular level as  
 animated, dangerous and talismanic", which suggests an official intention to promote no  
 more than the artistic valour of the sculptures.

380 When reading the full text of the *Ekphrasis*, we sometimes receive the impression of  
 being in front of a text to be performed; several marks of colloquialism, space  
 indications (scenic indications indeed) and other aspects of Christodoros' verses make  
 it easy to imagine an actor (or the poet himself) at least reading his text aloud to an  
 audience, around and in dialogue with the statues themselves. We can think, for  
 385 instance, of a guided tour of some of the masterpieces of the Zeuxippus, or even a  
 poetical and dramatic performance prepared for one of the several dedications of  
 statues we know to have taken place in the Baths. More than a simple speculation, this  
 chance becomes a real possibility if we think of parallel poems that we know to have  
 been performed for an audience such is the case of the *Ekphrasis* of Eagia Sophia that  
 390 Paul Silentiarius wrote in the late-sixth century, after the rebuilding of the temple,

395 to be performed in the day of its dedication, in 563. The only manuscript that transmits the text clearly shows marginal annotations and other scenic indications destined for the actors. That Christodoros' poem could have been written for a similar ceremony and performative end is a very plausible possibility. Maybe we only lack the manuscript to prove it.

400 The arguments provided so far seem to unveil a little more of Constantine's artistic convictions and careful plans for his own city of Constantinople. Archaeology, literary sources and the comparison with contemporary or neighbouring examples show how the case of the Zeuxippus, as for its functioning as an art-gallery, is indeed special. It was not the result of years of sculptural integration in a public building, rather the best-known (and documented) case of the construction of a national gallery of antique sculpture, with very clear political and artistic purposes. But the Zeuxippus, with its  
405 statuary, was also a space of memories. It was the space where art was meant to forge the inexistent memories of an entire people, the Byzantine people. A people to whom past-references were not part of its own history; a people who needed, more than any other and in a very crucial moment, to fulfil its lack of *paideia*. And plastic art was an important part of the imperial plan to do so.

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[https://www.academia.edu/w637w205/\\_The\\_statuary\\_collection\\_held\\_at\\_the\\_Baths\\_of\\_Zeuxippus\\_AP\\_2\\_and\\_the\\_search\\_for\\_Constantine\\_s\\_museological\\_intentions\\_Synthesis\\_2w\\_La\\_Plata\\_Argentina\\_20w4\\_w5\\_30](https://www.academia.edu/w637w205/_The_statuary_collection_held_at_the_Baths_of_Zeuxippus_AP_2_and_the_search_for_Constantine_s_museological_intentions_Synthesis_2w_La_Plata_Argentina_20w4_w5_30)