

Decline in 4th and 5th century art and literature



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Does the notion of 'decline' have any relevance for our understanding of the art and literature of the fourth and fifth centuries?

Since the Renaissance it has been common for critics to judge the fourth and fifth centuries as a period of cultural and artistic decline. It has been argued that the Late Roman Empire produced an era of "artistic and cultural stagnation"[1] and it is crucial to explore whether this notion of 'decline' is really relevant in terms of creating a balanced understanding of fourth and fifth century art and literature. Furthermore, it is necessary to address the difficulties produced by dealing with the nature of change within a traditional society[2]; particularly, the judgement of whether that change is for the better or worse, and the impact of modern prejudices on our appreciation of Late Antique art and literature.

The notion of 'decline' can be interpreted as significant to our understanding of art in this period; especially in terms of the major changes in style which were characteristic of the fourth and fifth centuries. The most fundamental of these changes was the general movement away from the 'naturalistic' conventions of classical art[3] towards a more abstract and symbolic style. It is this movement, or decline, away from the esteemed classical apex which has been marked as a negative development[4].

Decline is also apparently seen through the deterioration in the overall quality of Late Antique art. Not only has the workmanship of the period been described by critics as 'cruder'[5], but the originality of pieces has also been questioned. One such example is the Adlocutio relief on the Arch of Constantine; the juxtaposition of opposing art styles, 'naturalistic' and '

abstract', has not only been described as of less high quality than earlier art, but it has also formed the basis of the Renaissance critics' perception of 'artistic decline'[6].

The quantity of large scale sculpture, an intrinsic part of public display for Emperors and the Roman elite, decreased during the fourth and fifth centuries[7]. This could be interpreted as a change in taste and a new focus on different media for public display, or it could provide further evidence for the 'decline' of art.

The literature of the fourth and fifth centuries has faced similar criticisms, which also mainly focuses on its movement away from classical conventions. One view is that "the literature of the period is mostly, as literature, second-rate and unoriginal"[8]. The concept of 'unoriginality' is significant to texts from Late Antiquity as many writers had a much greater engagement with earlier literature than their predecessors[9], this could be interpreted as imitation and even more importantly as a decline in creativity or originality.

Perhaps more significant however, is the momentous change in style away from that of the classical period. This deviation from the classical ideal has been seen as a debasement and a devolution[10], which may have provided a foundation for the notion of 'decline' during the fourth and fifth centuries. The highlighted issues have been based on the lack of eloquence, rhetorical skills or poetic poise in comparison to writers such as Cicero, Ovid and Virgil. Contemporaries such as Jerome and Augustine comment on the changes in style in their works. Jerome describes the style of the religious works as "

rude and repellent”[11]and Augustine declares that such works are “unworthy to be compared to the stateliness of Ciceronian eloquence”[12].

The influence of Christianity on writers of this period could provide an explanation for the apparent decline in quality of literature. An example where this has affected literature is the subsidiary role of poetry within a society which is completely dominated by the Church and its religious texts[13]. There is a much greater focus on less creative works such as theological literature, which consisted of a high proportion of commentaries on the scriptures[14]. Furthermore, the focus of cultural authority had shifted away from expressive and non-religious literature, and so such works lost their ability to be either intellectually or culturally relevant to contemporary readers[15].

It may be possible to suggest that the notion of decline does have relevance for our understanding of art and literature of the fourth centuries, and perhaps any decline or deterioration is caused by the influences of the strong religious inclinations of this period[16].

However, on the other hand, it is important to recognise that the judgement of decline in relation to this period may have been affected by modern prejudices and the perceived criteria of what constitutes good art and literature.

In terms of the artistic ‘ decline’, perhaps it would be more beneficial to view this period more neutrally and to recognise that it represents a different concept of art and its stylistic mannerisms[17]. More relevant than the notion of decline has to be the notion of change, especially considering that the <https://assignbuster.com/decline-in-4th-and-5th-century-art-and-literature/>

fourth and fifth century art movement marks the first time since the fifth century BC, that the naturalistic classical conventions shifted towards the abstract[18]and towards the new age of symbolic Middle Age portrayals.

A significant area of change and development is the use of churches as an art form[19]. Although public buildings had been a common form of artistic experimentation throughout the history of the Romans, the fourth century brings a new dimension with the influence of Christianity. An example of this is the Church of Magia Sophia in Constantinople, whose architecture demonstrates the artist skill and creativity of the period. The church is described in great detail by Procopius of Caesarea who compares the experiences of viewing it with coming “ upon a meadow with its flowers in full bloom”[20]. The exploration of domes, vaults and space is clearly just as prominent as it was before Late Antiquity[21]; it is just done through the building of Christian churches rather than traditional construction programmes.

The Late Antique period features an increase in art works of silver and ivory[22]and also includes the use of elaborate carving techniques in Christian Sarcophagi. Some examples include one from the Mausoleum of Helena, which shows battle scenes between Romans and barbarians, and one from the Mausoleum of Constantina, which is decorated with acanthus scrollwork and cherubs[23]. The increase of the use of high quality carving is a clear demonstration of why the notion of decline should not be applied to the art of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Furthermore, the art of this period is not only believed to be of high quality but it also shows a considerable amount of innovation. This included the expanded use of opus sectile panels of inlaid coloured marbles, for example the panels used in the secular Basilica of Junius Bassus from the Esquiline in Rome[24]. Figurative mosaics were also used in more innovative ways, and were introduced into the walls and vaults of buildings rather than just into floors, for example at the Mausoleum of S. Contanza in Rome[25].

An element of continuation can also be seen throughout fourth and fifth century art and shows the merging of new Christian iconography with traditional motifs and styles. Mosaics, for example, continue to be as intricate and stylized in villas[26] and are of the same high quality in public buildings. Some of the more elaborate mosaics seen from this period include the mosaics of St Lawrence at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia[27] in Ravenna, and the mosaics of saints at the Hagios Georgios in Salonika[28]. Imperial art also continues to be prominent well into the fifth century, including bronze and marble statues, reliefs and dedications, and columns and triumphal arches[29]. Some examples of this are the bronze of Constantius II and the marble Theodosian portraits[30].

Many of the traditional motifs survive until after the fifth century[31] and demonstrate that a complete decline cannot have been possible as artists were still able to continue creating works as they had done before. An example of the persistence of classical iconography can be clearly seen in the calendar of the year 354[32]. The notion of decline does not necessarily take into consideration the stages necessary in any stylistic progression and that the “continuous dialogue” between classical and abstract methods of

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representation in art[33], is something to be celebrated as development rather than criticised as decline.

The relevance of decline in literature is perhaps similarly misjudged and the literature of the fourth and fifth centuries may be under-rated by critics because of the overall conception of a cultural deterioration[34]. The scholars, who suggest that this is a period of “ cultural stagnation”, may have dismissed much of the rich material which was developed alongside the rise of Christianity.[35]The literature of this period needs to be assessed on its own terms and its own context[36], rather than under the constraints of modern fashions and preferences.

Rather than being in decline, this period is arguably the ‘ Golden Age’ of Christian literature[37]and its sheer volume of surviving works means that it is one of the richest periods for literature in antiquity. Important literary figures, who have all made huge contributions to the Christian literature of the age, include Athanasius, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Augustine has been described as a “ marvellous genius” and his work the “ City of God” has been described as one of the first great philosophies of history.[38]Similarly popular Jerome, who was responsible for the translation of the bible, managed to raise “ scriptural studies to a level not surpassed for many centuries”[39]. Aside from just religious texts, the literary sources for Late Antiquity include panegyrics, legal codices, biographies, histories and geographies[40].

The influence of Christianity led to an increase in popularity of biography, as it supported the role of the individual[41]. One of the best examples is

Athanasius' 'The Life of Antony', which helped to spread the concept of monasticism. The increase in biographies of entire communities rather than just an individual are also seen, mainly monastically based, for instance Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*. [42]

Historical works were common throughout the period and demonstrated a continuation in traditional literary form; however, they took on a much stronger religious focus, and many took polemical positions either defending or condemning Christianity[43]. Arguably one of the most important of the historical works was the History of Rome by Ammianus Marcellinus. He not only wrote in a style reminiscent of early historians[44], such as Livy or Tacitus, but he also showed a remarkable lack of bias which is often evidenced in the writings of contemporaries[45].

There are also enough surviving letters to make the fourth and fifth centuries one of the major periods for ancient epistolography. Just one example are the letters from Q. Aurelius Symmachus of which we have nine hundred surviving letters, covering the entire period from the 360's to AD 402[46].

A particularly highly criticised area of literature, in terms of decline, is poetry as many critics thought that there were few writers of that age who could actually rank as true poets in terms of style.[47] However, there is a scholarly split in this matter as many see the fourth century as the time when poetry re-emerged in both popularity and strength[48]. Poets like Porphyrius Optatianus had a huge impact through their poetic achievements and the poetry of the age had a distinctive character that set it apart from its predecessors[49]. Innovation in poetry can be seen through the

development of multiple pattern poems, which pushed the boundaries of conventional poetry. One of the key figures in the movement is Porphyrius who had a “singular ability to manipulate verbal surfaces in varied ways”[50]. The criticism that late antique poetry suffers from an increasing level of imitation and unoriginality should be readdressed as authors may have taken up traditional forms but they endowed them with new and exciting qualities[51], which thus created a unique and original work. What appears to be actually prominent in fourth and fifth century poetry is diversity[52]rather than decline.

Further literary diversity is brought to the fourth and fifth centuries by the influences from the East and their developments in literary languages. Syriac was already developed as literary language before the fourth century, but it was during this later period that its influence began to be truly felt. The most important surviving works are from Aphrahat and Ephrem and both their texts demonstrate the sophistication of the Syriac culture[53]. The importance of Syriac literature can be seen in the fact that Jerome, writing in 392, had already read in Greek translation a work by Ephrem on the Holy Spirit[54]. Their works showed an awareness of Greek rhetorical models[55]and further suggest that this was a period of development and not decline. Less extensive, although still important, is the emergence of the Coptic literature of the Egyptians. Coptic literature was mainly functional and used in a religious context but it did include a translation of the bible.

In conclusion, it is possible to understand the reasoning behind the judgement of fourth and fifth century art and literature as part of an overall notion of decline, but much of this is based on modern values and not those

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of the contemporaries to such art forms. In terms of understanding the literature and art of the period in a non biased and non prejudiced way, it would appear far more beneficial to dismiss the notion of ' decline' and adopt a more neutral notion of ' development' or ' change'. A fundamental part of understanding this art and literature is the appreciating of some of its unique features, it particular the conflict and compromise[56]between several religious philosophies and two opposing art styles. Whether viewed in a negative or positive light, it seems wrong to dismiss the art and literature of the period under the demise of decline, when it is in fact diverse, vigorous, and of a high quality. Furthermore, I conclude that the notion of decline should not have any relevance on our understanding of the art and literature of the fourth and fifth centuries.

(Word Count- 2, 443)

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