

Last Holdouts?  
Temple Closures, Conversions, and Abandonment Chronologies

In the mid-10<sup>th</sup> Century, Emperor Constantine VII *Porphyrogénnētos* authored *De Administrando Imperio*, a guide to rulership for his heir. Among its accounts of lands and peoples, he mentions the Mani Peninsula of the southern Peloponnese.

*“Ἰστεον, ὅτι οἱ τοῦ κάστρου Μαΐνης οἰκήτορες οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀπὸ τῆς γενεᾶς τῶν προρρηθέντων  
Σκλάβων, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τῶν παλαιότερων Ῥωμαίων, οἱ καὶ μέχρι τοῦ νῦν παρὰ τῶν ἐντοπίων Ἕλληνες  
προσαγορεύονται διὰ τὸ ἐν τοῖς προπαλαιοῖς χρόνοις εἰδωλολάτραις εἶναι καὶ προσκνητὰς τῶν  
εἰδώλων κατὰ τοὺς παλαιοὺς Ἕλληνας, οἵτινες ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ ἀοιδίμου Βασιλείου  
βαπτισθέντες Χριστιανοὶ γεγόνασιν.”*

“The inhabitants of the city of Maina are not of the race of the aforesaid Slavs, but of the ancient Romans, and even to this day they are called ‘Hellenes’ by the local inhabitants, because in the very ancient times they were idolaters and worshippers of images after the fashion of the ancient Hellenes; and they were baptized and became Christians in the reign of the glorious Basil.”

[Moravcsik and Jenkins 1967].

This is an odd description, especially when considering that the reign of Emperor Basil I was from 867 to 886 CE, well into the Christian era. If the common Christian narratives for the end of Paganism are to be believed, then the old religions simply faded away with the ascension and conversion of Constantine the Great, barring the occasional holdouts among the aristocracy. And yet, the law codes of Theodosius and Justinian point to a persistent “paganism” within the Roman state, as seen in the emperors’ repeated illegalizations of Paganism into the 6<sup>th</sup> Century [Cameron 2011].

Recent studies support a gradual transition from polytheism to Christianity, with only sporadic moments of strife [MacMullen 1997, Cameron 2011]. The reach of both the state and church would have been major factors in the conversion rate. Cities would have converted early thanks to the greater degree of government oversight and church presence, while the hinterlands may have taken longer to convert depending on accessibility, degree of law enforcement, and myriad other factors. An urban-rural divide exists in the decline of Paganism and rise of Christianity, but for how deep and how long is unclear. Nevertheless, Constantine VII's account is a significant claim, and requires significant evidence.

The goal of this paper is to assess the pace of Christianization beyond urban areas, and the possibility of enduring polytheistic holdouts. It does so by critically analyzed *De Administrando Imperio* as a source of information, and by explored the chronologies of temples and churches in the Mani Peninsula, Greece. Such sites serve as archaeologically detectable proxies for (public) religious practices. The Mani Peninsula had long been remote, inaccessible, and difficult to govern, serving as an excellent example for where Paganism could have survived in the Mediterranean basin into the Christian era [Greenhalgh and Eliopoulos, 1985]. Existing scholarship of these sites was analyzed for positive evidence of cult activity (when it could be found), as well as signs of closure, reuse/spoliation, and destruction. The combination of site chronologies and material evidence was searched for any indications of polytheistic activity post 6<sup>th</sup> Century. This era saw the last credible historic accounts of Pagan temple and school closures, notably in Athens. Any activity post-dating this time could support the emperor's description of the Maniots being late polytheists in the Mediterranean basin, as well as the slower pace of Christianization.

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