

Objects in Motion:  
The Circulation of Religion  
and Sacred Objects in the Late  
Antique and Byzantine World

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*Objects in Motion: The Circulation of Religion and Sacred Objects in the Late Antique and Byzantine World*

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# Introduction

## Hallie G. Meredith

Ordinary objects are often perceived as acting like clay. Through use, malleable objects are imprinted with the character and personality of their owner. From dolls, to pens, to guitars, everyday objects are imbued with the agency of their primary user. Whether Indiana Jones' iconic hat, or 'Lucille', BB King's famous guitar, objects are not just associated *with* certain individuals, they become extensions *of* certain individuals. Whilst these may be iconic examples, the underlying idea is ubiquitous. Everyday objects are relics. As a remnant of a time and place, coupled with the personal history of an individual, a relic is set apart from similar objects. Intriguing questions, such as 'by whom?' and 'why?' lead us ever closer to the original contexts of production, circulation and reception. Whether secular or sacred, relics were originally consecrated in order to serve a specific role. The verb *consecrate* is derived from the Latin *consecrare* (to make sacred, dedicate)<sup>1</sup>; this definition highlights the fundamental idea of giving 'the object itself a character of holiness', thus 'fit for a religious use.'<sup>2</sup> It is this sense of the word that forms the basis for the ideas explored in the papers and time periods represented in this volume. By exploring key objects and analysing them through the lens of their original contexts of viewing and interpretation, scholars are building up a series of synchronic snapshots of objects in motion. By layering the accumulated meaning gathered from a series of synchronic studies, a diachronic perspective is sought. This kaleidoscopic accretion of 'social canvases'<sup>2</sup> can then aid in our modern understanding of the circulation of religion via material culture.

All too often, scholarship begins and ends with a discussion of the True Cross<sup>3</sup>. The original use of the wooden cross made it synonymous with its original user; making it the greatest of Christian relics<sup>4</sup>. Whilst the True

Cross is an iconic example of an object animated by the power of a divine user, it embodies an idea that gained currency in late antiquity<sup>5</sup>. The underlying premise was built upon social ideas embedded in the Graeco-Roman world long before the time of the True Cross.

The True Cross is not an anomaly. It is part of broader social development in the late Roman or early Christian period. The mechanism operated in the following way: a key, but ephemeral event occurred; then a physical remnant of an important event was identified as sacred – typically the material object was used by or inspired by a divine power, or devoted to a holy figure for use in worship – this served as a kind of starting point in the metaphoric life cycle of consecrated, material culture with culture-specific meaning; the history of the objects' meaning was then somehow joined with the movable object. This way the movable object retained its associated religious meaning and social significance; next, the culturally-constructed, movable, material culture then circulated in society in the role of divine agent. In the role of agentive relic, the object then moved among mankind performing miracles and actions in a manner similar to the person who had imprinted it with divine power. The outlook represented by the True Cross is the basis for relics (both corporeal relics from once living saints, and non-corporeal relics, i.e. objects worn or used by holy figures) as well as reliquaries which develop in this period. The papers in this volume consider circulating material culture in order to gain access to the underlying ideas in circulation; drawing upon 'the period eye' in order to explore interpretations accessed via the union of history and object whereby the very fabric of religious objects were imprinted and imbued with pivotal ephemeral events. Thereby, the authenticity of the religious material culture in circulation stems from the preservation, orally and in writing, of the past in tangible material form. Material culture provides witnesses. As such, witnesses can authenticate events from the past. Thus, future generations have a means of directly accessing – and validating – the past in the present. Moreover, divine power acquires a presence in the worshippers' present.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, see 'consecrate, v.', second edition, 1989; online version November 2010. <<http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/39490>>; accessed 4 February 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1891.

<sup>2</sup> Essentially defined as instruments upon which socially-constructed meaning is projected. See H. Meredith "Christianizing Constantine: Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* as a Late Antique Social Canvas" in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> That is the particular wooden structure, an upright post with a horizontal crossbar, upon which Jesus Christ suffered death.

<sup>4</sup> *It. Eg.* See M.L. McClure and C.L. Feltoe, ed. and trans., *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919. Available at <http://www.ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm>, esp. 74-5. See also J. Wilkinson, trans., *Egeria's Travels*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1981, see esp. notes 169-73 for extracts from the late fourth century pilgrim's account recounting worship in the Holy Land before the True Cross.

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<sup>5</sup> For an exhaustive list of fragments of the True Cross compiled from archaeological and literary sources, see A. Frolov, *La relique de la Vraie Croix: Recherches sur le développement d'un culte*, Archives de l'orient chrétien, vol. 7, Paris, Institut français d'études byzantines, 1961; A. Frolov, *La reliquaires de la Vraie Croix*, Archives de l'orient chrétien, vol. 8, Paris, Institut français d'études byzantines, 1965. For an outline of Late Antique sources on the perceived power of the True Cross as a substitute for the absent body of Christ, see A.J. Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2006, esp. 12-15.

The papers in this volume are divided into two overarching themes: *I. Becoming Holy* and *II. Holiness in Circulation*. These themes suggest a lifecycle of objects, progressing from birth to death and continuing onto rebirth. As sacred objects, they become holy and are then (potentially) embedded in social memory from this point onwards. This volume includes material ranging from conceptions of a shared past via tales of miraculous events, pilgrimage souvenirs, the movement of Manichaean magical incantation bowls and amulets, Christian altars, ivory diptychs, embroidered diplomatic gifts, to places of ritual power and the movement of ideas. Whilst the content of the papers is rich and varied, they share a common focus: exploring the role of a circulation of religious ideas embodied in different material forms of cultural expression.

*Part I, Becoming Holy*, focuses on questions to do with the act of making everyday objects sacred. *Becoming Holy* addresses the subject of transformation, typically from a familiar, commonly used physical object to a religious object dedicated exclusively to religious use. Familiar types of objects – cups, plates, lamps, benches, articles of dress, water, sand, and wood – can be transposed from the context of the everyday to the sacred, effectively moving from the natural cycle of birth to death, to rebirth as a ‘holy’ object for exclusively religious use<sup>6</sup>. Whilst their form and original function remains unaltered, their context and dedicated use are radically altered. Hallie Meredith and Crispin Paine both address the role of objects becoming holy.

Hallie Meredith’s paper “Christianizing Constantine: Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* as a Late Antique Social Canvas” sets the stage by introducing the term ‘social canvas’. Considering monotheistic material, Meredith not only examines the life of Moses as a model for Eusebius’ fourth century interpretation of the *Life of Constantine*, but also the key role of highlighted fourth century material culture woven into Eusebius’ extremely visual re-presentation of events. This paper, therefore, considers the implications for the study of religious objects as social canvases, whether from late antiquity or from other historic periods, as an approach with which to analyse the transformative power inherent in objects becoming holy.

Crispin Paine’s paper “The Portable Altar in Christian Tradition and Practice” redresses a lacuna in Late Antique studies through his treatment of altars as a sacred movable place. Paine raises the following questions: how do portable altars become holy, and what are the implications of that sanctity? Paine’s study surveys altars from as early as the fourth century, discussing their function, materiality, and rites of consecration and

dedication, to present-day ethnographic evidence concerning the life cycle of such dedicated material culture.

The familiar takes a new meaning whilst retaining its shape. The memory of a ‘religious’ vessel maintains and is continually associated with a particular owner. New viewers and users are taught about the history and use of such transformed objects. Those histories are then circulated, for example in the form of hagiographies. Meredith and Paine consider how sacred objects become holy in the eyes of their intended users and viewers. Tackling these kinds of fundamental process-orientated questions as they approach sacralisation in antiquity, the authors exploring this theme address the cultural frameworks within which *everyday* objects were transformed into *religious* objects.

*Part II, Holiness in Circulation* focuses on questions to do with how movable material culture exhibits the agency of the original user. Circulation and utility express ideas about religion in a manner more tangible than that articulated in doctrinal writings. Drawing upon textual representations of physical objects, this part explores how culture-specific interpretations are constructed.

Once transformed – often made *sacer* in a liminal space before reintroduction as a rebranded ‘holy’ object in service of religious personae – dedicated material culture does not simply revert back to previous, common use. Use and function continue, often unchanged, but what does change is the user. A lamp, for example, dedicated to Christ has the potential to remain a functioning lamp. The community of worshippers may indeed use it as such. The act of use, however, becomes a display of piety to a physically absent holy figure. Use also becomes a model for worshippers. An inscribed lamp dedicated to Christ with the name of a donor Bishop displayed in a church not only serves to illuminate the communal space, but the illuminated inscription literally highlights the Bishop’s role as exemplar to his community of fellow Christians<sup>7</sup>. Use by proxy underscores the commemorative social function of sacred movable material culture.

Once transformed, such dedicated objects have a cultural currency imprinted within their very fabric. As extensions of their original or only users, they have an agency all their own, thereby acting as intermediaries in place of the user. Thus, just as Mary served as the pure vessel for the

<sup>6</sup> For the familiar types of objects, see for example, J. Wilkinson *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 2002. On the idea of a lifecycle for material culture, see A. Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1986; A. Gell. *Art and Agency*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998; R. Osborne and J. Tanner, eds., *Art’s Agency and Art History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, a treasure of inscribed, sixth century open-work lamps dedicated to the Holy Sion by the Bishop of the See E. Dodd, “The Sion Treasure: Problems of Dating and Provenance”, *Sixth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference, Abstracts of Papers*, Oberlin, OH., 1980; S. Boyd, “A Bishop’s Gift: Openwork Lamps from the Sion Treasure”, in *Argenterie Romaine et Byzantine. Actes de la Table Ronde, Paris 11-13 Octobre 1983*, ed. F. Baratte, Paris, De Boccard, 1988, 191-202; S.A. Boyd and M.M. Mango, eds., *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in Sixth-Century Byzantium*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992. See also I. Ševčenko and N.P. Ševčenko, eds. and trans., *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion*, Brookline, MA, Holy Cross Press, 1984.

Immaculate Conception, saints underwent a purification process whereby they prepared themselves to act as pure vessels for Christ's gifts. Whilst living saints and other holy figures were vessels receiving holy power directly from God, in death and eternally thereafter, their bodies retained those divinely granted gifts precisely because they remained dedicated vessels in service of Christ<sup>8</sup>. The same framework applied to material culture.

By reinterpreting holiness, these papers address the impact and circulation of reputation in what is effectively the consecrated life of an object. Christ himself no longer walks among men, besides teachings imparted to mankind, what remains are physical vestiges from his time on earth – physical objects used and spaces occupied by his corporeal presence. The Bible records how Christ's touch healed men, women and children<sup>9</sup>. The circulation of material culture imprinted with Christ's agency thereafter allowed for transference of Christ's power onto those objects. First, these objects became holy through their connection to a holy figure. Once they became well known in their own right, as a physical presence, these objects could then reinforce Christ's presence even in his corporeal absence. Thus, nascent myths and legends gained credence with the conspicuous addition of tangible material culture as corroborating evidence of their veracity. The circulation of legends via material culture, therefore, strengthened the credibility of received truth, the object as a material witness, and reciprocally, a worshipper's faith in ephemeral events. Georgia Frank, Anthony Cutler, Matthew Canepa and Ida Toth each address the role of holiness in circulation.

Georgia Frank's "Telling Jerusalem: Miracles and the Moveable Past in Late Antique Christianity" establishes memory as a movable object. Frank considers sixth and seventh century material, in particular pilgrim's accounts and souvenirs, addressing the mobility of sacred objects in the form of stories about the movement and relocation of sacred objects as they journeyed west from Jerusalem. Frank's paper frames the second part of this volume, highlighting the role of memory in interpreting sacred objects in motion.

Anthony Cutler's "The Matter of Ivory and the Movement of Ideas: Thoughts on some Christian Diptychs of Late Antiquity" continues the theme of the life cycle of early Christian ideas and objects. Identifying the role of the craftsmen as well as the spectator, Cutler introduces the notion that form, idea and image can co-exist. Cutler considers the 'afterlife' of ivories, re-animating ivory diptychs by analysing their visuality, tactility, history and use.

<sup>8</sup> The bones and other remnants of living saints served as terrestrial intermediaries – in perpetuity – between God in heaven and man on earth. The very fact that saints' relics could be fragmented and still retain their original power underscores the underlying outlook that Christ's gifts flowed equally throughout the fabric of a vessel's body. Whether whole or in pieces, divine power remained indivisible.

<sup>9</sup> Pilgrim's guides provide eyewitness testimony of divine power present in secondary relics. See, for example, Wilkinson *Egeria's Travels*, 1981; Wilkinson *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, 2002.

Matthew Canepa's "The Art of Ritual and Manichaean Magic: Text, Object and Image from the Mediterranean to Central Asia" explores the transmission of ideas in Manichaean magical texts in order to highlight the interconnected world of Eurasian magical practice. Canepa discusses the central role of movement for Manichaeism since its third century inception in the Sasanian empire, the syncretistic nature of cult practice as well as the cultural contexts for magical practice. Set against this cultural backdrop, Canepa investigates fifth to seventh century Manichaean incantation bowls as well as a Persian spell and amulet, as a means of understanding how Mesopotamian practitioners appropriated and incorporated ideas into their movable magical texts.

Ida Toth's "The Narrative Fabric of the Genoese *Pallio* and the Silken Diplomacy of Michael VIII Palaiologos" incorporates an imperial diplomatic gift in combination with an imperial oration and another contemporaneous text in order to contextualise the gift. The exchange of the gift is analogous to a relic of medieval cross-cultural heritage. Toth investigates the conceptual framework within which the object operated, tracing a diplomatic gift in circulation across a radically altered political, cultural and religious landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean in the second half of the thirteenth century. As defenders of the Christian heritage, the Byzantine gift considered by Toth demonstrates continuity regarding the circulation of ideas via movable material culture.

These are the kinds of questions and issues that the contributors to this volume have considered. This volume is intended to stimulate research into the overlooked 'minor arts' and to re-animate them for modern audiences. It is hoped that this collection of essays will serve as a springboard for future interdisciplinary work weaving together elements from religious doctrine, orality, ritual, cultural history and the history of art, through material culture.

What unites all these studies – as well as objects in motion – is their use of social canvases for the projection of social meaning. The import of the objects highlighted in antiquity originated in the purposes for which they were designed. Whereas Constantine's physical battle standard had a social use, that of a totemic standard for display in battle, Eusebius' ideological concerns regarding succeeding emperors' continued Christianity remains evident in his textual interpretation of events. Miracles were employed to authenticate the past in the present. Diplomatic gifts served as remnants of allegiances. Sacred movable places, altars and magical material culture, whether Christian or Manichaean, allowed worshippers to access and commemorate with divine power. Religious objects circulated ideas, echoed in the objects' form, content, visuality and tactility. Objects in motion unite the circulation of ideas with the circulation of material culture. Thereby, objects serve as extensions of their agents, as material witnesses, and as

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social canvases simultaneously acting as catalysts for and reinforcing one another.