

Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond ed. by Cynthia Hahn and Holger A. Klein. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, 2015, 376 pp. ISBN: 978-0-88402-406-4, Hardback, £71.95.

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The volume contains papers presented at the eponymous Dumbarton Oaks symposium in 2011. This conference was held parallel with the “Treasures of Heaven” exhibition in the Walters Art Museum. While the exhibition and its catalogue was concerned with relics and reliquaries in the Middle Ages under broad terms, *Saints and Sacred Matter* mostly focuses on Byzantine and eastern (mainly Islamic and Jewish) material. There is also an interesting parallelism to note: some of the objects analyzed in the present volume were presented in the exhibition and some authors published studies both in the catalogue and this book. *Saints and Sacred Matter*, however, should not be treated as only an extension of the exhibition catalogue, its discussion of lesser-known Byzantine reliquaries are a highlight of this volume.

The richly illustrated volume contains fifteen studies which deal with a great variety of topics. The first chapter by Jaś Elsner (‘Relic, Icon, and Architecture: The Material Articulation of the Holy in East Christian Art’) explores how reliquaries can enshrine the sacred into a hidden space, while their container can still enable access to it and emphasize its content through visual representations. Elsner demonstrated his argument through reliquary pendants of the True Cross and St Demetrios, which can be opened in a similar manner as books or sacristy doors, thus providing a controlled enshrinement of the relics by their owners. Julia M. H. Smith (‘Relics: An Evolving Tradition in Latin Christianity’) presented how our modern definitions of relics can be traced back to the nineteenth century, which essentially differs from the medieval conception that did not classify them and moreover included a much wider range of materials and forms.

Ra‘anan Boustan (‘Jewish Veneration of the “Special Dead” in Late Antiquity and Beyond’) argued that fifth through eighth-century Jewish writers developed a novel approach to relics utilizing the Christian tradition that eventually transformed the Jewish attitude towards the dead in ways which could not have been predicted at the outset. Nancy Khalek (‘Medieval Muslim Martyrs to the Plague: Venerating the Companions of Muhammad in the Jordan Valley’) presented the tombs of three prominent Companions of Muhammad and elite military commanders who died not on the battlefield but of the plague. She claimed that since they still died while engaged with jihad these “non-battlefield martyrs” became equivalent with the jihadi martyrs and their tombs offer excellent examples of relic veneration in Islam. Through the example of sixth-century ampullae from the Holy Land, Patricia Cox Miller (‘Figuring Relics: A Poetics of Enshrinement’) emphasized the dual metaphysical and tactile aspects of religion which involves objects in an inextricable manner.

Derek Krueger (‘Liturgical Time and Holy Land Reliquaries in Early Byzantium’) offered a new interpretation of pilgrim art from the Holy Land from the sixth and seventh centuries. He connected changes in the imagery to changes in the liturgy, and interpreted the Christological cycles of the illuminations of the Rabbula Gospels and pilgrim tokens as liturgical sequences. Ann Marie Yasin (‘Sacred Installations: The Material Conditions of Relic Collections in Late Antique Churches’) showed

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how during late antiquity, relics, after a brief procession through the city, were buried permanently under the altar. Through their subterranean setting they became an architectural part of the church. However, as Yasin contended, the clergy paid attention to commemorate the deposition and the name of the saint(s) by setting down inscriptions of either a slab, a floor mosaic, or as part of the monumental decoration system of the church. The study of Vasileios Marinis and Robert Ousterhout (‘“Grant Us to Share a Place and Lot with Them”: Relics and Byzantine Church Building (9th–15th Centuries)’) complements the study of Yasin, presenting how the post-iconoclast relationship of relics and architecture differed from the late antique one. They showed that while icons did not have a standard location within the church building, access to relics was generally strictly controlled in the middle Byzantine period.

Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen (‘Spolia as Relics? Relics as Spoils? The Meaning and Functions of Spolia in Western Medieval Reliquaries’) showed how spolia enamels in thirteenth-century reliquaries were included as relics in their own right and also as remains of older reliquaries. She suggested that the meaning and function of relics and spolia were interchangeable, and moreover considered different medieval perceptions of them. Cynthia Hahn (‘“The Sting of Death is the Thorn, but the Circle of the Crown is Victory over Death”: The Making of the Crown of Thorns’) presented the evolution of western reliquaries of the Crown of Thorns. Hahn juxtaposed the way of distribution of Thorn relics by Saint Louis to ecclesiastical institutions in a “Crusader manner” and by the Valois kings to the most important courts and churches in lavish reliquaries. Alice-Mary Talbot (‘The Relics of New Saints: Deposition, Translation, and Veneration in Middle and Late Byzantium’) examined relic veneration of the so-called “new saints” who were recognized in the middle and late Byzantine period. The revival of hagiography in the period indeed offers great potential for studying the process of the translation and veneration of their relics, and also how the corporeal remains of the holy persons became sacred relics.

The study of Holger A. Klein (‘Materiality and the Sacred: Byzantine Reliquaries and the Rhetoric of Enshrinement’) engages with the duality of matter and supernatural power within reliquaries. He argued that these extraordinary things cannot be classified purely as objects or signs, but they can blur the boundaries between these categories. Klein was also concerned with critical questions behind the rhetoric and hierarchy of enshrinement and how the relics represented the whole miracle-making power of saints. The study of Jannic Durand (‘Byzantium and Beyond: Relics of the Infancy of Christ’) is concerned with the relics of the Infancy of Christ. Durand demonstrated that the Infancy relics already appeared as early as the Passion relics, and were often included in True Cross reliquaries. Beside aiming to collect the Infancy reliquaries, Durand also suggested that these relics originated from the Holy Land but arrived to the West through Byzantium. Kishwar Rizvi (‘The Incarnation Shrine: Shi‘ism and the Cult of Kingship in Early Safavid Iran’) examined the process of creating the image of charismatic kingship in sixteenth-century Safavid Iran. He focused on the textual, pictorial, and architectural representations, connected with the Safavid dynastic shrine in Ardabil, which can be placed into context with the reinvention of the dynastic history of the new rulers who themselves embodied sacred rulership.

Instead of a conclusion, Anthony Cutler’s (‘The Relics of Scholarship: On the Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation of Hallowed Remains in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, Early Islam, and the Medieval West’) study stands as the last chapter of the volume. Cutler offered an overview on the different (or often similar) approaches towards relic veneration in the Christian and Muslim world. This variety is one of the most exciting advantages of the volume as a whole. The comparative attitude is a key feature throughout the studies, not only examining different cultural approaches, but also

differences in the same cultures across different periods. The volume is a valuable contribution towards relic studies by going further beyond the boundaries of the western world.