

Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, (Rev. Ed. of *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, First Published 1982), Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C. 2010.

The present publication is the second edition of *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, published in 1982, that accompanied an exhibition called *Sacred Souvenirs: Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. The second edition not only doubles the length of the text and increases the amount of illustrations by 50%, but also integrates the recent research done on this topic into the text. Vikan's announced purview, the same as for the original book, is to explore the portable artefacts of Eastern Mediterranean pilgrimage from the 5th to the 7th century against the backdrop of contemporary texts and the archaeology of the holy sites. The intent is to understand what the pilgrims took home from their travels and what they left behind, if and how these objects were decorated, and how this decoration could tell us more about the purpose of the objects. Before embarking on a search for answers to these questions, Vikan writes a brief introduction to the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the early Byzantine period. The destinations are defined here: in addition to the Holy Land which was the most frequented, the early pilgrims were also drawn to sacred sites in Asia Minor, Egypt, Greece, and Syria. While the Holy Land was a place of pilgrimage to visit the holy places of the Bible, other countries of the Eastern Mediterranean had shrines dedicated to saints.

In the first chapter, Vikan defines the devotional objects gained at holy places and gives us a brief overview of their possible use. "*Eulogia*," which is a Greek term for a blessing (in Latin, *benedictio*) refers to the blessing received by contact with a holy place, a holy object, or a holy person. The blessing can be realized through re-enactment of the event that had sanctified the *locus sanctus*. The *eulogia* that comes through contact can be received directly and immaterially (by kissing or touching a relic) or indirectly and materially through an object or substance that has been itself blessed by physical contact with the sacred. This objectified blessing can then have one of three basic functions: to protect the owner from demons, to heal, and to bear an amuletic power that can help protect the owner on his journey back home. The function depends on the site it was brought from, the substance it is composed of, and images that it may bear. But how do we know about these functions? What did the pilgrims actually believe about the blessings?

The chapter about the pilgrims' beliefs regarding the blessings is the strongest section of the book. The texts on which the author bases his discourse are well cho-

sen and varied. Vikan explains here the objectification and transportability of the sacred, which is the possibility to concentrate the sacred in places and objects and to transfer it, mainly by touch. The spirituality of the early period of Christian pilgrimage is based largely on touch, which is very important to understand because in the later period, the emphasis was more on the visual aspect. Another dynamic linked to the pilgrimage is the *mimesis*, the endeavour to imitate holy heroes and their acts and thereby obtain their protection. This way, carrying the image of Saint Elisabeth hiding with child from the massacre of the innocents would have ensured the pilgrim holy protection and help if he got into a life threatening situation during his journey, or wearing an amulet depicting Sarah would have helped women who wanted to conceive. The image and the sacred substance were thus complementary and they potentiated the power of the amuletic object. The short paragraph about the antique pagan origin of such devotional practices is pertinent here. This extremely interesting topic deserves more than just three lines concerning one single case of healing shrines, that of Asclepius in Rome. The antique ancestors of Christian pilgrimage are, of late, a much-studied topic.¹

Besides three single-pilgrimage artefacts² that are addressed separately, the author sets out four major types of image-bearing blessings: "Simeon tokens," "Menas flasks," "Asia Minor flasks," and "Monza-Bobbio Ampullae," which he analyses in more detail in the next chapter.

Simeon tokens are terra cotta amulets dating from the 6th and 7th centuries and coming from an eminent pilgrimage site, Qal'at Sem'an, where Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder lived. About half of the nearly 250 exemplars bear the image of the saint standing on a column and crowned by angels, the second half presents other motifs: New Testament scenes, Adoration of the Magi, Tempest Calmed, and Women at the Tomb, as well as iconic portraits of Christ and of Virgin and Child. The second group of objects dates from the same period as Simeon tokens and is associated with Saint Menas and his shrine at Abu Mena in the Maryut desert, about 45 km southwest of Alexandria, in Egypt. These flasks bear images of the saint as an orant between camels. Another group of terra cotta flasks is associated with Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor because most of them have been found there. Unlike other groups of *ampullae*, these were probably meant to carry not holy water or holy oil, but another contact relic: the manna. Their iconography is quite diverse, bearing images of New Testament scenes

such as Entry to Jerusalem, Flight to Egypt, or Tempest Calmed. Some of them show a seated or standing figure, presumably Saint John. These flasks are from about the same time period as those of Saint Menas, in between the 6th and 7th centuries.

The fourth and last group is represented by nearly 40 pewter or lead *ampullae*, most of which have been preserved at Monza, in the Treasury of the Cathedral, and at Bobbio, in the Monastery of Saint Columbanus, since the early 7th century. However, some exemplars are preserved in museums in the USA (Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art in Cleveland, the Menil Collection in Houston) and in Germany (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Landesmuseum Württemberg in Stuttgart, some fragments in F. J. Dölger-Institut in Bonn, Erzbischöfliches Diözesanmuseum in Cologne, and two other exemplars are conserved in a private collection in Munich). On the basis of the images, the inscription “Oil of the Wood [Tree] of Life of the Holy Places of Christ,” and contemporary pilgrims’ accounts describing their sanctification, these flasks can be associated with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Many of the *ampullae* have images of Women at the Tomb and scenes containing a cross, the crucifixion, as well as a scene that Vikan titles Veneration of the True Cross. The difference between these two scenes is based on the presence of two kneeling figures at the foot of the cross that Vikan identifies as supplicants venerating the cross and even as pilgrims because of their resemblance to the Magi appearing on other Monza-Bobbio *Ampullae*, who also came as supplicants from distant lands to venerate the child Christ. These are not the only scenes present on the flasks, other themes relate to other *loca sancta*, for example, Annunciation (Nazareth), Nativity (Bethlehem), Baptism (the Church of Saint John in Bethany, today Wadi al-Kharrar), etc. The problem of the provenance of the *ampullae* is not even mentioned by the author; he attributes to all of the flasks a Jerusalem origin, in spite of the variety of themes relating to other *loca sancta* in the Holy Land and despite the very varied dimensions of the different flasks.

The genuineness of the objects believed to transmit the holy power is questioned in the following chapter, considering that the benefits of the holy object were often exercised far from the holy place and enjoyed by people who did not even effectuate the pilgrimage. As a consequence, these people did not know if the object really came from the *locus sanctus* it was supposed to belong to, if the holy vessels really conserved sanctified liquids or sacred soil, and by what means the blessing was realized. But the most important query is whether a contemporary pilgrim even cares about all of this. According to Vikan, today’s concept of authenticity was elusive in earlier times; as proof he takes the example of the shift of the site of Transfiguration from

Mount Hebron to Mount Tabor because the latter location was more convenient for the pilgrims’ itinerary. The sanctified object was justified by the *dynamis* that it contained by virtue of touch with the holy, which could perform miracles even in a distant place. Thus it was the belief that was important, not the reality.

The link between the images on the *eulogiai* and the sacred power believed to be present in these objects that has already been mentioned in the chapter about pilgrims’ beliefs, is developed in more detail in the next chapter. As is usual in this book, these images are classified into several groups. The first one includes the scene Adoration of the Magi that serves as an image of self-identification of the pilgrim with the Magi because both groups, the Magi and the pilgrims, came to the Holy Land from distant places to worship Christ. The second group concerns the images of Tempest Calmed, Christ walking on Water, and several images representing figures on donkeys or horses (simplified scenes of the Flight to Egypt and the Entry to Jerusalem) that seem to be made in response to the concerns of pilgrims who travelled by sea or land. As in the case of the Magi, the pilgrim believes that by carrying archetypal images of traveling saints, he is assured of a safe passage. The idea is the same as the one mentioned earlier, where carrying pictures of Elisabeth or Sarah is meant to protect a specific group of people, supplicants for a specific protection. Other images bearing blessings are those that intertwine death and resurrection, such as the images of Lazarus emerging from his tomb. This relation seems plausible considering the fact that people often had relics or *eulogiai* entombed with them to accompany them for eternity. Very interesting is also the group of *ampullae* bearing the image of Doubting Thomas. Here the parallel between an archetypal image and the pilgrim himself is striking. In pursuit of affirming his faith, seeing and touching the holy places of Christ was to palpably believe in Christ. In much the same way, seeing and touching Christ’s wounds made Thomas believe in the resurrected Christ.

The counterpart to the pilgrim’s blessings is formed by objects that the pilgrims left behind at the holy site in gratitude for a miracle or in the hope that it would follow – the “votive,” sometimes described as *charisteria*. These items are of two types: inscriptional (common at early Byzantine pilgrim shrines), and image-bearing, in the form of a mural painting, a mosaic (the most well known are those from the Church of Saint Demetrios in Thessaloniki), or a metallic or stone plaque.

In the epilogue, the author reflects about the end of the well-established pilgrimage traffic and the production of pilgrimage art that reflects it. This decline was initially caused by the Persian incursions in the second decade of the 7th century, then by the Arab conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean basin some twenty years later. However, the Christian pilgrimage phenomenon later experienced a revival; the

Wondrous Mountain (site of Simeon Stylites) again started receiving pilgrims from the later part of the 10th century. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was revived on a much larger scale during and after the occupation of the city by the Crusaders (1099–1187), together with fresh production of lead oil flasks. There were profound changes in the second pilgrimage era with regard to the piety, volume, and imagery of the pilgrimage artefacts: the emphasis shifted from relic palpability to icons and intercession. While the early Byzantine pilgrimage and its spirituality were dominated by the touch aspect, the later medieval pilgrimage was totally immersed in the visual aspect: looking at the images and praying to them. Thus, while the Piacenza Pilgrim, at the beginning of the 7th century, described in his diary how he touched the relics, the German monk Theoderich in the 12th century, described which icons he saw and venerated.

As is apparent from this résumé, this book is divided into many brief chapters, which has advantages as well as disadvantages. On the one hand, its synoptic structure throws light on numerous matters associated with the widespread phenomena of early medieval pilgrimage to the Eastern Mediterranean region and to the Holy Land. But on the other hand, this brevity hinders fluidity in reading and understanding these matters, especially as the ordering of chapters is often random. As a result, this book is more a catalogue of pilgrimage objects and issues rather than a monographic book on the subject as suggested by the misleading title. This is understandable since the original function of the first edition (*Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 1982) was to serve as an exhibition catalogue. However, this is quite a huge topic that has never been addressed through a monograph and merits a more compact and profound approach. The author, who has studied Byzantine pilgrimage for more than twenty years³, builds his arguments on well-chosen examples and draws from contemporary sources; unfortunately sometimes he seems to stop at just listing the examples, from which he does not draw a clear discourse. As an overview of the material culture of the

early Byzantine pilgrimage, this book is a complete publication that provides readers an introduction to early Byzantine pilgrimage via its art. Nevertheless, to gain deeper knowledge of this topic, one needs to search for extended specific studies; a list of studies comprising recent research is documented in the bibliography. On the whole, Vikan's book is a very good catalogue of topics for people intending to study one of the pilgrimage art pieces or the early Byzantine pilgrimage art as a whole. But as the only existing treatise on this subject, this study is far from exhaustive.

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Notes

¹ See for example: Jaś Elsner – Ian Rutherford (eds), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, Oxford 2005. – Maribel Dietz, *Itinerant Spirituality and the Late Antique Origins of Christian Pilgrimage*, in: Linda Ellis – Frank Kidner (eds), *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity, Sacred and Profane*, Aldershot 2004.

² The Sancta Sanctorum Blessing Box which contains a collection of blessings from the Holy Land, the Seafarers' Tokens, which is a group of tokens to protect traveling pilgrims, and the token of Saint Elisabeth from Museo di san Colombano in Bobbio. These image bearing blessings are treated separately because not enough of them have been conserved and, therefore, they don't form compact group. However, at least the tokens were certainly products of a serial production process; on p. 21 we can actually find a "stamp" with an image that was impressed on medallions. Thus, it is evident that a huge number of these medallions had to have existed and had to form a consistent group.

³ Gary Vikan, *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, in: Linda Safran (ed.) *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, University Park, Pa. 1998, pp. 229–266. – Idem, *Early Byzantine pilgrimage devotionalia as evidence of the appearance of pilgrimage shrines*, in: *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie (Bonn, 22.–28. September, 1991). Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum / Ergänzungsband 20*, Münster 1995, pp. 377–388. – Idem, *Guided by Land and Sea, Pilgrim Art and Pilgrim Travel in Early Byzantium, Tesserae. Festschrift für Josef Engemann. Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum / Ergänzungsband 18*, 1991, pp. 74–92. – Idem, *Pilgrims in Magi's Clothing: The Impact of Mimesis on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, in: Robert G. Ousterhout (ed.), *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, Urbana – Chicago 1990 (Illinois Byzantine Studies I.), pp. 97–107. – Idem, *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, Washington D. C. 1982 (Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection publications; 5).

Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art explores the portable artifacts of eastern Mediterranean pilgrimage from the fifth to the seventh century, presenting them in the context of contemporary pilgrims' texts and the archaeology of sacred sites. The book shows how the iconography and devotional piety of Byzantine pilgrimage art changed, and it surveys the material and social culture of pilgrimage. In this revised, enlarged version, Gary Vikan significantly expands the narrative by situating the miraculous world of the early Byzantine pilgrim within the context of late antique magic and pre-Christian healing shrines, and by considering the trajectory of pilgrimage after the Arab conquest of the seventh century. 1 Gary Vikan, "Byzantine Pilgrimage Art" *Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, (1982) p. 3 2 *Ibid.*, p. 4 3 John F. Haldon, *The Palgrave Atlas of Byzantine History*, Basingstoke [U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan], 2005 p. 54 4 The Walters Art Museum website ([link](#)) 5 The Walters Art Museum website ([link](#)) 6 Vikan, p. 22 7 Brandie Rafliff and Helen C. Evans, *Byzantium*. Vikan, Gary. "Joseph Iconography on Coptic Textiles." *Gesta* 18, no. 1 (1979), pp. 99-108. n/a: n/a, n/a. Additional Essays by Edmund C. Ryder. Ryder, Edmund C.. "Nudity and Classical Themes in Byzantine Art." (September 2008). Ryder, Edmund C.. "Byzantine Ivories." (October 2007). Related. Primary Essays. Amulets and Talismans from the Islamic World.