Introduction

I began working on early Christian saints’ tombs looking for insight into how they both commemorated figures of the past, much like other monuments ancient and modern, and, at the same time, became increasingly vital centers of cultic activity. The early fourth-century basilica of St. Peter’s on the Vatican Hill (Fig. I.1 and I.2), for example, is at once a glorification and monumentalization of the pre-existing shrine to the apostle at its core as well as a massive architectural space designed to accommodate large numbers of Christian visitors. Such early Christian martyria constructed directly over the even earlier tombs or memorials of Christian saints bridged the temporal gap between the present of the imperially sanctioned and economically ascendant Church and its own heroic past of persecuted and victorious martyrs.

Over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries, saints’ tombs became sacred focal points where one could come into direct, physical contact with the divine. We see in the holy graves evidence of a strongly place-based sacrality. Expressions of this understanding of the materiality of the sacred include not only monumental architecture constructed on the sites associated with sacred events or holy people, but also pilgrimage and the protective and healing powers ascribed to physical relics. Consider, for example, the travels of Egeria, whose account of her voyage to Palestine and Egypt in the 380s is peppered with loci sancti; think also of objects such as the four-inch-tall terracotta ampulla, which would originally have contained sacred oil or dust taken home as a memento of the trip to St. Menas’ shrine outside Alexandria (Fig. I.3). Other manifestations include

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the deposition of saints’ relics within or underneath altars and inhuming the dead around tombs of saints, so-called ad sanctos burial. Such phenomena attest to an undeniable materialistic and topocentric view of sacrality among late antique Christians.

Yet, there is more to the story. As my research progressed, I became increasingly intrigued by features of monuments and aspects of saint veneration that are not fully explained by the materiality of relics and the “placeness” of cult. Often, for example, the inscription of saints’ names or images on church surfaces do not mark the location of relics but instead testify to votive prayers, donors’ benefactions, or liturgical celebrations. In addition, the direct, architectural assimilation of saints’ tombs, relics, or memorials to church altars is less regular than we might expect. In fact,
it is not at all uncommon for a saint’s memorial to stand in marked separation from the main liturgical altar and serve as an alternate ritual and architectural focal point to it. Archaeological evidence also challenges some features of the conventional interpretation of burial patterns within and around saints’ memorials. While scholars have, for example, stressed the materiality of saints’ remains in attracting later graves to physical proximity with them in death, many aspects of the appearance and arrangement of church burials seem to have little directly to do with the saints, and the relative chronology of burials rarely conforms to a pattern of neat expansion out from the initial nucleus of the martyrium.

Ultimately I came to see that an investigation of the impact of saints on late antique sacred topography that was limited to the examination of saints’ relics and funerary monuments alone would risk overlooking a wide range of valuable evidence. Indeed, the rich testimony of late antique churches demonstrates a set of much broader and under-recognized roles for saints within early Christian church spaces. With their names inscribed on capitals and lintels, their images arrayed on walls or vaults, and votive appeals or
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figure 1.3 Ampulla showing St. Menas between two kneeling camels, Egypt

dedications to them found on columns and mosaic pavements, saints were made materially and visually present throughout church buildings. The project thus evolved from a study of saints’ memorials per se into a broader investigation into the social and architectural effects of the rise in saint veneration on early Christian ecclesiastical space.

This is a book, then, about early Christian churches. It builds on a significant body of literature on ecclesiastical buildings, but it is not a study of architectural history in the traditional sense. Rather, it concentrates on

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spatial aspects of churches, or, the activation of the buildings through use. Specifically, it is interested in how the buildings in which Christians came together to pray and participate in eucharistic rites functioned as social and ritual spaces. What kind of “work” did church buildings perform for the communities who built and used them? How did they convey meaning and influence those who entered and took part in the rituals set within their walls? Getting at these issues involves investigation of both physical and ephemeral aspects of churches. The project therefore examines the architectural form and decoration of churches in light of the buildings’ interaction with and reception by their users.

This contextual approach reveals a complex and multifaceted picture of early Christian church spaces which were at once social and spiritual, economic and political. In particular, the book concentrates on three interdependent and overlapping spatial functions of churches: communication with the divine, community identity, and the creation and reinforcement of a connection with the past. It is possible to conceptualize this triad of functions by considering the church building as a means of communication between three different sets of interlocutors. The first form of communication facilitated by church space is that between God and the Christians who gather within the church. This exchange takes the form of prayers, offerings, and gifts and can be considered the “sacred” dimension of church space. The second type of communication articulated through churches is performed between the members of the community themselves. This “communal” aspect of church spaces includes the conveying of messages about both the definition of the community (who belongs and who does not), as well as about its make-up and shape (the relative hierarchy between individuals as seen in spatial and visual signs of privileged status). Third, church buildings and ritual construct a type of communication across generations. As past people and events are remembered in the present and preserved for the future, the “commemorative” aspect of church spaces is evident. The first half of the book identifies and explores these three aspects of early Christian church spaces, and the second explicitly turns to the ways in which saints’ cults influenced these spatial functions.

This book, in short, seeks to account for the visual and material manifestations of saints within early Christian churches which are not adequately explained by current readings of late antique architecture and sacred space. Its analysis suggests that the impact of saints’ cults on early Christian sacred
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geography is more pervasive and diverse, but perhaps less novel and radical than has been previously supposed. Specifically, it argues for an understanding of saints’ cults as a powerful means of extending pre-existing notions of corporate identity, intensifying social hierarchies, and connecting local Christian groups to larger earthly and heavenly communities.

GEOGRAPHY AND CHRONOLOGY

The book draws on evidence from Christian cult sites across the Mediterranean, including North Africa and Italy, Greece and the Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt. Though the discussion does not proceed by a direct region-by-region comparison, the Mediterranean perspective adopted here does seek to understand how the architectural diversity found across the early Christian world complicates our picture of an east/west geographical divide. One reason for taking up such a broad geographical range has been to safeguard against taking the observations about any one region as representative of broader norms. At the same time, it is by no means a wholly defensive measure. In adopting the Mediterranean-wide purview, I am interested in exploring potential parallels between localities which demonstrate diversity in regional architectural forms, cultic expressions, and local histories. The project thus seeks to investigate broad trends while simultaneously recognizing local particularities and difference. This aspect of my methodology runs parallel to recent historical work which examines the Mediterranean as a unit, but one composed of a “fragmented topography of microregions.” My analysis also shares with this scholarship a desire to bring smaller and less well-known sites into the discussion as a valuable control on the picture gleaned from famous monuments, such

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7 Chris Wickham’s recent magnum opus makes a strong argument for the perspective to be gained by transcending isolated, single-region studies: Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800. Oxford University Press, 2005.

as the churches of Rome, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. While effort has been made to juxtapose diverse regions, at the same time the shortage of relevant and available evidence from different areas presents a situation in which for any given issue, there is simply more to work with from some areas than others. I have thus opted in this book to present cases which best illustrate the issues at hand rather than offer up a complete catalogue or dossier of evidence, an endeavor that for several regions has already been admirably carried out by others.9

A word must also be said about what types of structures are included in this study. Over the course of the period under investigation, saints make their way into every church where liturgical services are held, in some cases bodily, in others only through their images or names which adorn the material structure or are evoked during the course of the liturgy. In its approach to questions of ritual and social construction of sacred space, therefore, the study draws on evidence from buildings which served as monumental memoriae over saints’ remains (martyria in the strictest sense), as well as structures of various architectural shapes in which regular liturgical services were held (centrally planned or basilican synaxis churches) or which served as episcopal seats (cathedrals). The word “church” is used here as inclusive of this range of different “types” of ecclesiastical architecture. Of course, churches were not the only kinds of sacred spaces constructed in the early Christian world. Domestic buildings too, for example, could be turned into sacrally loaded spaces of prayer and Christian devotion.10 They have been excluded, however, because they differ from early Christian church spaces on two points that are central to this study: the distinctively communal element (the buildings examined here served as urban or extra-urban public


gathering spaces for Christian groups not related by blood or household), and the relationship to institutional authority (church buildings fell under the direct orchestration of ecclesiastical officials).\textsuperscript{11} The chronological range of the project adopts a “soft” definition of the period of Late Antiquity, one defined less by sharp contours of the dates of singular historical events (which tend to affect different regions very differently) than by historical processes and material phenomena. Though glimpses of saint veneration exist as early as the second half of the second century (for example in the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp c. 165 CE), from the late third to early fourth centuries onward evidence for the beginning of a broad phenomenon takes clearer shape and becomes identifiable by numerous indices (archaeological, literary, and historical) among a growing number of Christian communities.\textsuperscript{12} The bulk of the evidence discussed, however, comes from the later fourth to sixth centuries, a time which witnesses both a great expansion of church construction and increasingly palpable liturgical, ritual, social, and architectural roles for saints.

The project is bound at the outer chronological edge by the seventh century when many of the phenomena explored are no longer in process of “becoming” but have become normative and widespread. By the late sixth and seventh centuries, saints’ relics and altars, for example, had become both physically and conceptually fused, the place of saints in the performance of liturgy solidified, and their celebrations codified into standardized calendars of feast days. All three trends speak to increased clerical oversight and regulation of saint veneration.

The seventh century is also a point at which the political and economic partitioning of the Empire reached pitched levels. Most obviously, the crises caused by the Persian and Arab threats of the early seventh century brought about major cultural, administrative, economic, and religious changes in many of the areas under study including the outright conquest of Syria.

\textsuperscript{11} Evidence from rural villa estates which included martyria and/or mausolea largely outside the control of the bishops points to an alternative type of Christian sacred space, distinct from the largely urban phenomenon of architecture serving bishop-led communities (Kim Bowes, “‘Un coterie espagnole pieuse’: Christian Archaeology and Christian Communities in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Hispania,” in Hispania in Late Antiquity: Current Perspectives, ed. and trans. Kim Bowes and Michael Kulikowski [The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World, 24], Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp. 189–258).

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differences often [were] a matter of timing rather than substance” also largely holds true for the specific issues investigated here.14 Our evidence for relative chronologies not only is far more secure than that for absolute dates but also better facilitates a geographically comparative investigation of the changes that buildings and the communities who used them underwent.

APPRAOCH AND SOURCES

As is clear by this point, the stress in this book is on the functions and use of built environments over the production histories of physical buildings. It is, nevertheless, important to emphasize that my analysis of the “social functions” of church spaces is not intended to eclipse the religious or sacred dimensions of ecclesiastical architecture, but rather to contribute to the analysis of religion and ritual in overtly social terms, an approach that is ultimately indebted to the foundational work of scholars such as Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz.15 Since this project is primarily about sites, however, it also draws on the work of recent theorists (including Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, J. Z. Smith, and Christopher Tilley) who have further developed the notion that, in addition to religion, space too is socially constructed – that space is a medium, not merely a container, for action.16 Finally, in shifting the focus of inquiry from the typologies and influences of Christian architecture to the lived experience of the ritual, social, and commemorative functions of church spaces, this study contributes to an ongoing conversation in art historical scholarship on the relationship between artworks or architectural structures and their real or ideal viewer(s), a line of investigation that has parallels in recent reception-oriented work on ancient inscriptions and liturgical ritual as well.17

17 The literature on viewer reception is extensive, but important works in Roman art history include Jai Elman, Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Peter Stewart, Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response, Oxford University Press, 2003; and John R. Clarke, Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans:
Approach and sources

Since my inquiry is directed toward understanding specific historical phenomena and real spaces, the material evidence of architecture is of central importance. In order to understand ways that buildings communicated with and affected their users, however, it is also essential to take into account the images and texts that its surfaces presented to the viewer. We must be attentive as well to the literary and historical evidence for how people moved through church spaces, and the words and actions they performed and witnessed within. The project therefore draws on scholarship from a range of specialized disciplines, including archaeology, epigraphy, art history, history, and liturgical studies to find insight into the questions under investigation.

In doing so, this study also hopes to encourage greater conversation across disciplinary lines. Recent years have witnessed an explosion of work on Late Antiquity in general and on the holy man, hagiography, and asceticism in particular. A key milestone in this direction, Peter Brown's fundamental book on the cult of saints, opened the field to a more critical analysis of the social context of late antique beliefs and power structures which both facilitated and adapted to the rise in saint veneration. Nevertheless, scholarly discourse on late antique saints' cults remains by and large the realm of historians and literary scholars and leaves many pressing issues regarding the interpretation of material remains, including burials, commemorative monuments, and basilicas yet to be addressed.

While this project has been inspired by historical and literary work on Late Antiquity and cults of saints in particular, it has also been propelled forward by dissatisfaction with the tendency to translate conclusions drawn from literary sources into explanations for archaeological evidence. There is simply too much slippage between expectations we gather from textual sources and what we find (or fail to) through investigation of material remains, and we often encounter phenomena in the archaeological record for which surviving texts have left us largely unprepared. At the same


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time, the bulk of archaeological evidence for late antique churches has had little impact on “mainstream” scholarship. Instead, much that is written about the spatial aspects of early Christian ritual and devotion is based on extraordinary sites, such as the Holy Sepulcher, St. Peter’s, or Hagia Sophia, though such famous buildings are not necessarily representative of the hundreds of fourth- to sixth-century churches now known from across the Mediterranean. “Christian archaeology” remains limited to a fairly narrow group of (mostly continental European) specialists and rarely receives critical engagement by a larger community of scholars whether art or architectural historians, classicists, historians, or religious historians. In the face of the florescence of work on late antique texts, this state of affairs is all the more striking.

While making no claim to present unpublished, newly excavated material, the current project seeks to redress some of this imbalance by synthesizing geographically diverse evidence gleaned from archaeological reports, museum collections, and on-site investigation, into a critical analysis of major issues of early Christian sacred space. The work makes an appeal for the value of material evidence and the importance of understanding the problems, pitfalls, and limitations of interpreting evidence from archaeological sites in our collective endeavor to understand the transformation of the ancient world in the period now embraced as “Late Antiquity.”

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The book opens with an investigation into theoretical models for the analysis of sacred space and their impact on our interpretation of ancient evidence. I argue for an approach to early Christian sacred space that foregrounds ritual and social processes in order both to account best for our primary sources and to understand better early Christianity’s place within contemporary late Roman culture. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which collective identity and memory were constructed by different groups through communal ritual and monumental memorials in the Imperial and late antique periods. I argue that in comparison with early Imperial tombs, which chiefly memorialized individuals in terms of their status within the household and served as vehicles for the group’s self-presentation, early Christian burial basilicas redefined the very concept of family by gathering the graves of unrelated Christians into a common space, commemorating them with homogeneous memorials, and expanding the commemorative audience to the local community of co-religionists. The following chapter looks at the act of constructing buildings as a form of social exchange in the Imperial and late antique periods. It is specifically concerned with the way church buildings, in comparison with other ancient, civic structures, signaled their status as objects of exchange and worked to inform involved