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Introduction: From 'Christianisation' to 'Christianness' in the Alps

by VLADIMIR IVANOVICI and ADRIAN BRÄNDLI

In 1908, a gold chain with two medallions was found at the base of the Capitoline Hill in Rome.¹ The medallions represent what we have grown accustomed to seeing as opposing, irreconcilable worldviews. Made of solid gold, the first is dated to the early fifth century and reproduces one of the most common iconographic formulas found on late antique jewellery, namely, a bride and groom facing each other while their union is consecrated by Christ, who hovers above their heads with garlands in his hands (Fig. 1).² The second medallion is a third-century hematite in gold casing. Engraved on the stone is a stylised image of the *ouroboros*, that is, the image of a snake consuming its tail, which was taken to signify cyclical renewal. At the centre of the *ouroboros* there is a depiction of the Anguipede, a composite being that was most commonly identi-

fied with a divine power called Abraxas. However, the inscription that accompanies the image mentions Harpocrates, the son of the Egyptian goddess Isis. The chain and the two contrasting medallions were likely buried during the Goths' attack of Rome in 410 (or the Vandals' in 455) and supposedly belonged to a Christian who combined faith in Jesus with belief in the amulet's protective powers.³ Such objects invite a critical review of our binary categories of 'pagan' and 'Christian'. The modern division of Romans into 'pagan' or 'Christian' presupposes clear-cut boundaries that tend to oversimplify the complexity and dynamic character of individual and group identities in Late Antiquity. Thus, they prevent us from seeing the nuances of living in the Roman and post-Roman world.



Fig. 1 Necklace with gold marriage medallion (ca. 400–500) and hematite amulet (ca. 100–200). From Rome. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1958, inv. no. 58.12

Recent research has shown ways out of this impasse. A growing number of studies addresses the flexibility that marked the performance of Roman religion and of public displays of identity.⁴ This brought recognition that the insistence of Christian authors on clearly defined boundaries between ‘pagans’ and ‘Christians’ and their systematic efforts to define and control appropriate behaviour indicate countless areas of overlap. In light of this, the study of the spread of the Christian faith can no longer be cast in terms of ‘Christianisation’ – a notion that implies a radical change of conviction and practice as a result of a coherent programme run by an external entity (typically, the body of rules represented by the Church).⁵ In particular after 313, when the number of persons adopting the Christian faith grew exponentially and the period dedicated to learning the meaning and importance of Christian beliefs and practices decreased from a minimum of two or three years to just forty days, devotion to Christ came to be expressed in countless variations and creative combinations.⁶ Like the owner of the gold chain with medallions, some adopted Jesus as God while continuing to believe in the power of other forces, or combined Christian habits with polytheistic, Jewish, or magical beliefs and practices.⁷ In addition, a significant quota of Christians postponed baptism – the quintessential token of forgiveness of sins and group affiliation – until the very end of their lives, which made them fall outside the Church’s definition of

‘Christian’.⁸ Scholarly assumptions of what must count as ‘Christian’ or be dismissed as mere pretention or half-hearted religious commitment has made a lasting impression on the study of religions in Late Antiquity. Rather than acknowledging the rich diversity emerging from the cultural construction of religion, scholarship has consistently classified historical figures like Decius Magnus Ausonius – a teacher of aristocratic origin who taught both future bishops and emperors, was named consul, and adopted Christianity late in life – as ‘semi-Christian’, identifying them with a disinterested, cultural Christianity involved in lavish aristocratic lifestyles or denying altogether any sincerity of belief on their part.⁹ A similar problem arises from the many competing variants of Christian faith that populated the religious landscape of Late Antiquity, offering a wide range of choice to both individuals and groups (Fig. 2).¹⁰

In response to some of these issues, Éric Rebillard introduced the notion of ‘Christianness’.¹¹ He pointed out that by dividing Romans into ‘polytheists’ (or ‘pagans’) and ‘Christians’, we reduce the latter to their faith in Christ, thus simplifying the complex issue of individual identity.¹² Of course, the same also holds true for the manifold practices and beliefs associated with Roman cults. One’s relationship with the divine sphere was just one of many aspects pertaining to individual identity that Romans performed simultaneously. In specific contexts,

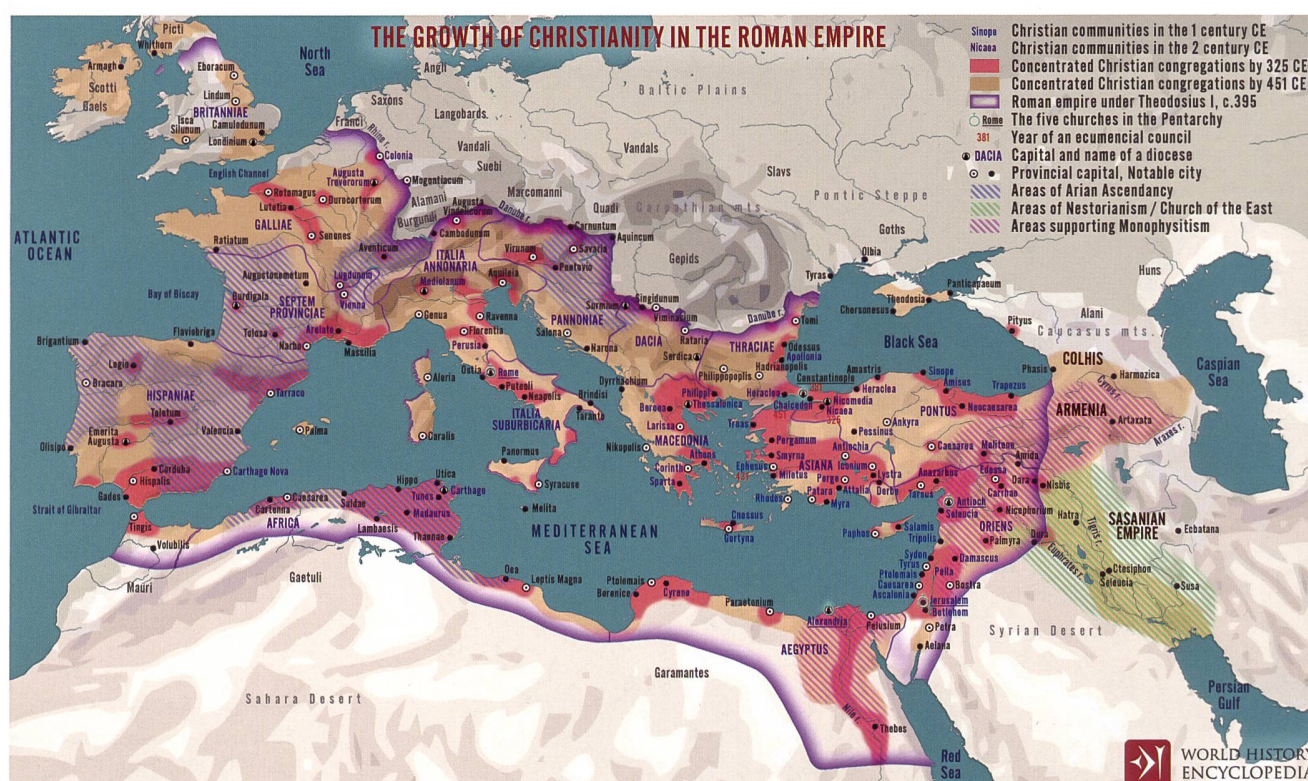


Fig. 2 Map showing the expansion of the Christian faith during the first five centuries CE, as well as the regional distribution of Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism. Simeon Netchev for World History Encyclopedia.

religious affiliation could become paramount and even cancel out other identity markers, such as, for example, in Christian martyrdom. Nevertheless, most of the time, people combined their faith with other elements, with the result that their faith was performed in specific, personal ways.

The tomb of a third-century Roman from Ostia – Rome's first colony – attests to this magnificently. Three reliefs decorating the tomb show its owner wearing insignia and performing ritual actions that identify him as a high priest of the goddess Cybele (Fig. 3). Our attention is immediately drawn to the crown with busts of Cybele and her divine consort Attis, and to the large bracelet decorated with the image of the goddess that covers the priest's right forearm. It has been observed, however, that the priest successfully combined serving Cybele with his social life, as indicated by the toga he is wearing.¹³ From around the time of Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE), the canons of deportment cultivated by members of the aristocracy also became popular among other social strata, with the result that one's corporality, physiognomy, gait, gesticulation, tone of voice, direction of gaze, body alterations, clothing, rhetorical talent, and knowledge were used to communicate individual identity. Accordingly, "to most Romans, regardless of rank, everyday life was a sequence of performances, rehearsed or extemporaneous."¹⁴ Thus, while we tend to assume that the owner of the gold chain (Fig. 1) displayed the Christian medallion while keeping the magical gemstone hidden – as indicated also by how the museum curator displayed the object at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – the case from Ostia and others like it indicate that the owner of the necklace may have displayed them simultaneously or changed their religious identity depending on context and interlocutors by choosing to display one medallion or the other. We should also consider that other elements in their physical appearance nuanced their relationship with the divine, adding to the symbolism of the medallion(s) displayed.

Using this bottom-up, flexible notion of religious identity, this special issue reviews the information we have on the Christian faith and practices in the area just south of the Alps in the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries. In the past, scholars have used the available data to identify a process of 'Christianisation', understood as the transformation of the local population into 'Christians'. Nevertheless, the Alpine region resists such an approach because it attests to only timid institutional efforts that allow for a thorough penetration of the territory. This assumption invites a rereading of local sources and customs in order to identify features that, very much like the toga of our priest from Ostia, may have facilitated the integration of different beliefs and practices into new forms of Christianity. It appears, instead, that the spread of Christianity in the Alpine regions mainly relied on individual initiatives. The scholars who contributed to this volume revisited the available evidence to evaluate its relevance in light of this nuanced understanding of reli-

gious identity, thus shifting the perspective from a unidirectional 'Christianisation' of the Alpine regions to the multidimensional notion of 'Christianness'. This adjustment of our lenses also covers systematic attempts at proselytising, which loom particularly large in narratives of Christianisation, but it equally highlights the range of religious identities that prevailed in the area. Secondly, this volume draws attention to the cultural coherence of the area from Turin to Trent and from Milan to the Alpine passes. In the past, scholars tended to study the spread of Christianity by modern province – i.e., in Lombardy, Piedmont, Ticino – which significantly hampered the ability to recognise recurring patterns that span the Alpine region.¹⁵ A more comprehensive view can provide clues to understanding these complex social and cultural processes. The volume at hand takes a first step in this direction, providing the foundation for further exploration, particularly with regard to the region north of the Alpine passes, whose study along the same lines is crucial to an integrative approach.



Fig. 3 Funerary relief of high priest (*archigallus*) of Cybele shown sacrificing to the goddess. Marble, 0,62 × 0,60 m, third century CE. From the Isola Sacra necropolis, Ostia.

The collected papers were presented at the international conference *Christian Belief and Practice in the Alps (250–600 CE)*, which took place at the Istituto Svizzero di Roma in November 2020. The contributions attest to the necessity of revisiting old sources and integrating evidence that has only recently become available, thus furthering our understanding of the slow-moving process of religious acculturation on the Roman periphery. **Silvia Giorcelli Bersani** opens the discussion by defining the Roman geographical and cultural space that we have come to term ‘the Alps’. By approaching it from different angles, such as ancient cartography, ethnography, history, and mythology, she identifies a rich stratigraphy of narrative patterns that revolve around questions of cultural alterity and a perception of the Alps as both a natural and a symbolic barrier that, for the Romans, was to be conquered. This perspective is reflected in the penetration of the Alpine region by a ramified system of roads, paths and passes. Taking up the latter point, **Elvira Migliario** highlights the significance of imperial routes – through cities and settlements and along established waterways and roads – for the dissemination of the Christian message in Late Antiquity. Her study shows that Aquileia was a principal point of entry of the faith into the northern Italian peninsula, while the centres of Milan and Vercelli appear to have guaranteed a broader penetration. This territorial integration is crucial to understanding the confrontation of Christian beliefs and practices with religions that had either already been firmly established in the area or had also found their way into the Alpine regions through travel and commerce.

Closely connected with these considerations, a second group of papers more specifically addresses Christianity’s spread into the area, making visible both patterns of dissemination and resistance. **Vladimir Ivanovici** discusses Ambrose (ca. 339–397), bishop of Milan between 374 and 397, who is credited with forming a unified ecclesiastical structure across northern Italy that allowed for region-wide, coordinated action. By squaring the textual evidence with material culture – particularly through the presence of baptisteries – Ivanovici presents additional indications of the Church’s missionary thrust in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. According to his reading, baptisteries attest to the extension of an ecclesiastical network that attempted to advance Christianity’s reach. This view is corroborated by archaeological evidence, as **Rossana Cardani Vergani** and **Maria-Isabella Angelino** show in their contribution. Studying a series of buildings and settlements, they successfully trace a Christian presence as far north as Bellinzona and, in the process, highlight the significance of individual objects and symbols for the study of Christianness. One wonders what the ongoing excavations at Muralto, on the northernmost shore of Lago Maggiore, might bring to light in the near future to broaden our understanding of the religious composition of the settlement.

Focusing on signs of pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices, **Francesco Massa** presents the intriguing cases of the remote Val di Non and the city of Turin, in which the continuity of pagan religious practices is attested. Massa questions the modern use of categories like ‘Christianisation’ and ‘paganism’ to put forth a model of clashing civilisations in the course of which a firmly established, coherent Christian movement swept away the pagan resistance. In stark contrast to such notions, his reading of the historical cases in question suggests fluid religious identities that stood in contrast to the normative force of evangelising Church representatives. Underneath layers of polemics and pressure, the evidence reveals the enduring vitality of pre-Christian religious practices adapting to an ever-changing society.

The volume concludes with an outlook on following centuries. Starting with Late Antiquity, **Roberto Leggero** traces the previously highlighted patterns into the Middle Ages. He sketches the emergence of a complex society in which both Christian and pre-Christian elements merge with the religious and political order of the time. Holders of political power and their families were crucial to the dissemination of Christian beliefs and practices as their conversion guaranteed a broader social diffusion and established religion as an instrument of control. To these ends, infrastructure was essential. In the Alps as well as in other regions of the former Roman Empire, bishoprics, parishes, and strategically placed monasteries allowed the proper organisation of the territory. In regard to the Alpine region, Leggero highlights the importance of monasteries, and of the centre of Chur in particular, in consolidating Christianity’s presence. The cave of Zillis, however, presents an intriguing example of a possible perseverance of pagan rites, which may even be reflected in the *Capitula Remedii* of the early ninth century. Despite difficulties in establishing a precise chronology of the cave’s phases, its active use does serve to confirm the fluidity of religious identities up to the medieval period.

Focusing on distinct but complementary aspects of the same process, the articles in this special issue work best when considered together. This issue revives the debate on the arrival and dissemination of the Christian faith in the area south of the Alps. By changing the perception of old and new historical and archaeological sources, the collected papers shed light on the dynamic underlying the spread of Christianity and invite similar investigations into the area north of the Alpine passes and also into the period that followed.

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NOTES

- ¹ ARTHUR SAMBON, *Collection Kalebdjian: Exposition de bijoux antiques*, Paris 1913, no. 111.
- ² GARY VIKAN, *Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium*, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44, 1990, pp. 145–163, at pp. 149, 155–6, fig. 19.
- ³ MARVIN C. ROSS and KURT WEITZMANN, *Catalogue of Byzantine and Early Medieval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection: Jewellery, Enamels and Art of the Migration Period*, vol. 2, Washington, D.C. 1965, p. 2; KURT WEITZMANN (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, New York 1979, no. 281, pp. 307–308.
- ⁴ See, e.g., JÖRG RÜPKE (ed.), *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford-New York 2013; id., *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*, Princeton 2018; JÖRG RÜPKE and GREG WOOLF (eds.), *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Stuttgart 2021. See also THEODORE DE BRUYN, *Making Amulets Christian. Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts*, Oxford 2017.
- ⁵ The concept of 'conversion', implying a sudden change in world-view and very rarely documented in the present context, underlies this view. On 'conversion' and the problems it poses, see BIRGITTE BØGH (ed.), *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity*, Berlin 2014; id., *Beyond Nock: From Adhesion to Conversion in the Mystery Cults*, in: *History of Religions*, 54.3, 2015, 260–278.
- ⁶ Cf., e.g., *The Council of Elvira*, Canon 42 and the *Apostolic Tradition* 17. See VLADIMIR IVANOVICI, *Competing Paradoxes: Martyrs and the Spread of Christianity Revisited*, in: *Studia Patristica*, 62/10, 2013, pp. 231–244.
- ⁷ See e.g., DAVID FRANKFURTER, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (=Martin Classical Lectures 34), Princeton 2018; id., *Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 11/3, 2003, pp. 339–385.
- ⁸ GORDON P. JEANES, *How Successful was Baptism in the Fourth Century AD?*, in: *Studia Patristica*, 20, 1989, pp. 379–383.
- ⁹ On the notion of 'semi-Christian', see CHARLES GUIGNEBERT, *Les demi-chrétiens et leur place dans l'Eglise antique*, in: *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, 88, 1923, pp. 65–102. On Ausonius, see HAGITH SIVAN, *Ausonius of Bordeaux: Genesis of a Gallic Aristocracy*, London-New York 1993.
- ¹⁰ Thus, scholars now speak of 'Christianities'. See KAREN L. KING, *Which Early Christianity?*, in: SUSAN ASHBROOK HARVEY / DAVID G. HUNTER (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford 2008, pp. 66–86.
- ¹¹ ÉRIC REBILLARD, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE*, Ithaca-London 2012, pp. 7–9.
- ¹² E.g. THEODORE DE BRUYN, *The Use of the Sanctus in Christian Greek Papyrus Amulets*, in: *Studia Patristica* 40, 2006, pp. 15–20.
- ¹³ JACOB ABRAHAM LATHAM, *Roman Rhetoric, Metroac Representation: Texts, Artifacts, and the Cult of Magna Mater in Rome and Ostia*, in: *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 59/60, 2014/5, pp. 51–80; ANJA KLÖCKNER, *Tertium genus? Representations of Religious Practitioners in the Cult of Magna Mater*, in: RICHARD L. GORDON / GEORGIA PETRIDOU / JÖRG RÜPKE (eds.), *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire* (=Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, vol. 66), Berlin-Boston 2017, pp. 343–384.
- ¹⁴ RABUN TAYLOR, *The Moral Mirror of Roman Art*, Cambridge 2008, p. 20.
- ¹⁵ A notable exception is represented by the publications of GIAN PIETRO BROGIOLO, which have often discussed material and textual sources from the whole area.

IMAGE CREDITS

Fig. 1: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Fig. 2: Simeon Netchev, Zürich.

Fig. 3: Museo Archeologico, Ostia.

