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Research Project



Relics, war, and power: political and military uses of Christian relics in Byzantium and the medieval West (c.600-1200 C.E.).

This research project proposes an examination and comparison of the use of Christian holy relics in war and military contexts by the rulers of Byzantium and of the various polities of Western Europe, between the seventh and twelfth centuries.¹ This research will contrast written literary sources, such as chronicles and hagiographies, with material, epigraphic and iconographic evidence, such as relics and reliquaries. The main objective is to understand the sociocultural function and meaning behind the use of holy relics in war and military contexts in the medieval Mediterranean world.

Modern scholarship neglected the cult of relics, regarding it as a product of “medieval ignorance” and superstition, until the 1960s and 1970s, when a number of ground-breaking studies showed the cult of relics as a cultural revolution of Late Antiquity. Since then, scholarship has progressively devoted more attention and new perspectives to the subject. Nonetheless, there is still no systematic study focused on the use of Christian relics in war or military contexts, neither for the Eastern Roman Empire nor for medieval Western Europe.² This project has a double theoretical background, combining the “war and society studies” and the “theory of agency of things” to examine the sociocultural role of Christian relics. Accordingly, relics are conceptualised as “charismatic objects” i.e. material things with agency, which, within a certain cosmological frame, can cast a strong aura of power, reverence, and awe. Charismatic objects help to create relationships of power, and narratives of authority, community, and identity. Moreover, this research also analyses the performative and economic elements involved in the cult of relics.³

Therefore, my research will examine questions such as: 1) How different medieval rulers understood and used Christian relics. What were main regional similarities and differences? 2) How did rulers associated themselves with relics? 3) What ritual, performative and symbolic elements were involved in the military use of relics? 4) What was the political function and sociocultural meaning of the military use of relics? 5) What was the relation between material culture, war, religion, and power in the medieval world? 6) What does the use of relics tell us about the medieval ideas of rulership and authority? The project also explores the relationship between material culture, supernatural beliefs, political power, religion, and war, which is a fundamental issue to understand the medieval world, but it is also significant to understand other human societies of the past and present.

¹ Beyond the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), the research will focus mainly on the Visigoth kingdom of Toledo and the Medieval Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, on the Merovingian, Carolingian and Capetian France, and on the Holy Roman Empire under the Ottonian, Salian and Hohenstaufen dynasties.

² Frolow, A. (1961); Brown, P. (1971; 1981). Geary, P. (1978); Mergiali-Sahas, S. (2001); Klein, H. A. (2004); Hahn, C, Klein, H.A. (2015); Wisniewski, R. (2018).

³ Bourke, J. (2006); Hoskins, J. (2006); Horodowich, L. (2009); Radermacher, M. (2019).