SUPPLICATORY PROCESSIONS WITH CHRISTIAN RELICS: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, AND RITUAL FUNCTION IN THE MEDIEVAL EURO-MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

PROCESIONES SUPLICATORIAS CON RELIQUIAS CRISTIANAS: ORÍGENES, DESARROLLO Y FUNCIÓN RITUAL EN EL MUNDO EURO-MEDITERRÁNEO MEDIEVAL

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ARK CAICYT: https://id.caicyt.gov.ar/ark:/s24516821/okak3arrc

Fecha de recepción: 12/01/2026

Fecha de aprobación: 16/03/2026

Abstract

This article examines supplicatory processions with Christian relics across the medieval Euro-Mediterranean world. It traces their Late Antique emergence at the intersection of three developments: Expanding beliefs in the apotropaic power of relics; the consolidation of Christian processional liturgy; and scriptural precedents, especially Old Testament models such as the Ark of the Covenant. Adopting a comparative approach considering both the Eastern Roman Empire and the Latin West, it analyses how relic processions were deployed in moments of danger and calamity, and how their forms varied across contexts. Rather than assuming uniform evolution or direct transmission, it emphasises parallel developments grounded in shared conditions, with significant regional variation. Finally, it reflects on the sociocultural functions of relic processions, highlighting the capacity of these "charismatic objects" to structure collective action, reinforce cohesion, and articulate authority in moments of crisis.

Keywords

Christian relics - Supplicatory processions - Charismatic objects

Resumen

Este artículo examina las procesiones suplicatorias con reliquias cristianas en el mundo euro-mediterráneo medieval. Rastrea su surgimiento en la Antigüedad tardía en la intersección de tres procesos: la creencia en el poder apotropaico de las reliquias; la consolidación de la liturgia procesional cristiana; y precedentes bíblicos, especialmente modelos veterotestamentarios como el Arca. Desde un enfoque comparativo que considera tanto Bizancio como el Occidente latino, analiza el uso de procesiones con reliquias en momentos de peligro y calamidad, y su variabilidad según distintos contextos. Lejos de asumir un desarrollo uniforme o transmisión directa, subraya desarrollos paralelos anclados en condiciones culturales compartidas, con diferencias regionales importantes. Finalmente, reflexiona sobre las funciones socioculturales de estas procesiones, destacando la capacidad de estos

"objetos carismáticos" para estructurar la acción colectiva, reforzar la cohesión y articular autoridad en momentos de crisis.

Palabras clave

Reliquias cristianas - Procesiones suplicatorias - Objetos carismáticos

Introduction - Two Curious Cases

This article examines a Late Antique and medieval ritual that became common across the Euro-Mediterranean world: Supplicatory processions with Christian relics. It begins by outlining the cultural and liturgical conditions that made the practice possible, then analyses selected case-studies from the Eastern Roman Empire and the Latin West, focusing mainly on the seventh to tenth centuries. It ends with comparative reflections on the sociocultural function of these processions with relics and on the methodological value—and limits—of comparison.

It is striking that the two earliest known accounts of supplicatory processions with relics in military settings are closely parallel despite their distinct contexts, and that they allegedly took place only two years apart. Prokopios, in his narrative of the Persian War, reports that Apamea (Syria) possessed a fragment of the True Cross, enclosed in a precious reliquary for the protection of relic and city. When Khosrow I approached Apamea with his army in AD 540, the bishop led a procession with the fragment, and a miraculous flame appeared above him. Although the city opened its gates, Khosrow accepted tribute and spared Apamea from plunder, enslavement, and the loss of its relic. Prokopios' narrative implies that divine protection followed the ritual display of the relic.[1] Gregory of Tours (who wrote in the late sixth century) offers a similar story about Zaragoza, besieged by the Franks around AD 541-542. The local population performed a supplicatory procession around the city walls, singing psalms and carrying the tunic of the martyr Saint Vincent to seek intercession and protection. Gregory says that when the Frankish troops learned what the townspeople were doing, they were so frightened that they lifted the siege and withdrew. Even allowing for literary and rhetorical shaping, the parallels remain suggestive.[2] The consideration of these two narratives raises a series of questions: Were these authors describing already widespread sixth-century practices? Is the close chronology coincidental? Or do the narratives reflect a broader mid-sixth-century cultural transformation? To approach these questions, two

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[1] PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA, *Bella*, I.11, edited by Jacob HAURY and Gerhard WIRTH, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1962-1964, vol. I, pp. 198-202.
[2] GREGORY OF TOURS, *Historiae*, III.29, edited by Bruno KRUSCH and Wilhelm LEVISON, *Gregorii Turonensis Opera, Libri historiarum X*, MGH, SS rer. Merov. 1,1, Hannover, Hahn, 1951, pp. 125-126.

developments must be considered together: (1) the belief in the protective power of relics; and (2) the emergence and spread of Christian processional liturgy.

The Belief in Protective Relics

Christian veneration of relics, while shaped by older Mediterranean traditions and cultural attitudes, emerged as a distinct and rapidly expanding phenomenon in the late fourth century. Brown famously described the cult of saints and relics as a cultural revolution of Late Antiquity, and Wiśniewski has underlined the role of healings and exorcisms associated with martyr shrines.[3] In the Christian tradition, the physical remains of saints—bones, ashes, fragments—and contact objects such as clothing or instruments of martyrdom retained a bond with the saint's soul. Relics were thus tangible points of contact between heaven and earth: Not divine in themselves, but sacred vessels through which God's power was mediated.[4] An expanding repertoire of ritual practices associated with Christian relics emerged from these premises, including consecrations, oaths, healings, exorcisms, and—later— processions.[5]

Supplicatory processions with relics presupposed a specific conviction: Relics could operate apotropaically, safeguarding individuals, communities, and places against danger. This notion emerged between the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Chrysostom describes saints' bodies as a secure and unbreakable wall for the city where they rest. Paulinus of Nola depicts relics of Andrew and Timothy in Constantinople as twin towers, mirroring the protection of Peter and Paul in Rome. Augustine remarks that Christians were disappointed because Rome's relics failed to prevent the sack of AD 410. Theodoret of Cyrus states that cities

[3] The veneration of Christian relics was connected to earlier traditions such as the ancient cult of the heroes and ancestors, the Jewish veneration of prophets, and various amuletic practices of the ancient Mediterranean, but it was essentially a new cultural phenomenon: Peter BROWN, "The Rise and function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), pp. 80-101; *The cult of the saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, London, SCM Press, 1981, pp. 1-21; Arnold ANGENENDT, *Heiligen und Reliquien: Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom Frühen Christentum bis zum Gegenwart*, München, Beck, 1994, pp. 149-166; Andreas HARTMANN, *Zwischen Relikt und Reliquie: objektbezogene Erinnerungspraktiken in antiken Gesellschaften,* Berlin, Verlag Antike, 2010; Robert WIŚNIEWSKI, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 8-69.

[4] BROWN, op. cit., pp. 1-21; ANGENENDT, op. cit., pp. 1-14; 149-166; Cynthia HAHN and Holger A. KLEIN, "Introduction"; Julia SMITH, "Relics, an Evolving Tradition in Latin Christianity", in Cynthia HAHN and Holger A. KLEIN (ed.), *Saints and Sacred Matter. The Cult of relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, pp. 1-12, 41-60

[5] Also in ritual practices such as the "humiliation of relics" and various others, see: Patrick GEARY, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978; "Humiliation of Saints", in *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1994, pp. 95-125; Arnold ANGENENDT, "Holy Corpses and the Cult of Relics", in Marika RÄSÄNEN et al., *Relics, Identity, and Memory in Medieval Europe*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, pp. 13-20.

venerated martyrs' remains as "guardians and defenders". Yet in most early sources protection is imagined as passive: Relics remain *in situ*, and the saint's supernatural guardianship is presumed to emanate from the saint's tomb rather than from a ritual mobilisation of a material object.[6]

Before the sixth century, the closest parallel to a protective ritual involving a relic appears in the pilgrim Egeria's account regarding a Persian siege of Edessa. In her narrative, the bishop prays at the city gate with the famous letter of Christ preserved there, but the episode is exceptional and not strictly a procession.[7] More generally, relics were usually neither exposed nor moved. Saints protected cities from within their resting places—for example, the fragment of the True Cross allegedly enclosed by Constantine in the porphyry column of Constantinople.[8] This model remained common and widespread well beyond Late Antiquity. The *Miracles of Saint Demetrios* attributes multiple interventions to Demetrios' relics, yet these were never removed from under the altar of his church.[9] Middle Byzantine homilies likewise present Constantinople's relics as protecting city, ruler and empire.[10] In the Latin West, the notion that patron saints protect the places where their relics rest is equally well attested from the early fifth century into the early modern period.[11] The key question is

[6] JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In Martyres Aegyptios*, 1, 26-28, 694, edited by Pauline ALLEN and Nathalie RAMBAULT, *Sources Chrétiennes 595*, Paris, du Cerf, 2018; PAULINUS OF NOLA, *Carmen 19*, 142-143, edited by Franz DOLVECK, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 21*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015; AUGUSTINE, *Sermo 296*, *Patrologia Latina 38*, cols. 1359-1365; THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *Graecarum affectionum curatio*, VIII.10.6-8, edited by Pierre CANIVET, *Sources Chrétiennes 57*, Paris, du Cerf, 1958; WIŚNIEWSKI, op. cit., pp. 48–69.

[7] EGERIA, *Itinerarium*, XIX. 8-19, edited by Kai BRODERSEN, *Sammlung Tusculum*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 148-152.

[8] John WORTLEY, "The Legend of Constantine the Relic-provider", in *Studies on the cult of relics in Byzantium up to 1204*, Farnham, Ashgate, pp. 487-96; Holger A. KLEIN, "Constantine, Helena, and the Cult of the True Cross in Constantinople", in Jannic DURAND and Bernard FLUSIN, *Byzance et Les Reliques Du Christ*, Paris, Centre de recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2004, pp. 31-59; WIŚNIEWSKI, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

[9] Paul LEMERLE, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de Saint Démétrius, et la pénétration des Slaves dans les Balkans*, Paris, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979.

[10] Ioli KALAVREZOU, "Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court", in Henry MAGUIRE (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 50, 1997, pp. 53-79; Mark GUSCIN, "The *Narratio De Imagine Edessena* Attributed to Constantine Porphyrogenitus", in *The Image of Edessa*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 43-87.

[11] Gregory of Tours describes numerous instances where the saints protected the region around their shrines, in particular Saint Martin, patron and guardian of Tours. In Paris, Saint Genevieve was likewise revered as protectress of the city from the early Middle Ages to the early modern period. In Northumbria (England) and Compostela (Spain), Saint Cuthbert and Saint James were also conceived as guardians of the regions—and later, countries—where their relics rested, and numerous other similar cases can be found throughout Latin Christendom: BROWN, op. cit.; Gerald BONNER et al., *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, Suffolk, Boydell Press, 1989; Raymond VAN DAM, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993; Moshe SLUHOVSKY, *Patroness of Paris. Rituals of Devotion in Early Modern France*. New York, Brill, 1997; Jan VAN HERWAARDEN, *Between Saint James and Erasmus*. Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp. 451-505.

therefore not whether relics protected, but why communities began to take relics out of their shrines and parade them in supplicatory processions.

Christian Processional Liturgy

From John Baldovin's classic work to more recent contributions by Lavan, Andrade, Wickham, and Brubaker, Christian processional liturgy has been the object of various studies. Scholarship broadly agrees that Christian processions emerged in the later fourth century and spread rapidly in the fifth. Only a few were direct imitations of pre-Christian precedents, such as the Roman *adventus*. Most developed within the Mediterranean's long-standing processional culture and were shaped above all by Scripture, feast-days, and devotional practice. The frequency and social significance of Christian processions had little precedent in classical urban life.[12]

For the purpose of this article, it is useful to distinguish between recurrent processions tied to the liturgical calendar and extraordinary processions organised *ad hoc*.[13] The latter can be subdivided into (1) processions of thanksgiving, celebration, or commemoration – consecrations, arrivals of prominent persons, receptions of relics—and (2) supplicatory processions, penitential and protective in nature, performed in moments of crisis: Drought, earthquake, famine, plague, invasion or siege.[14] Pre-Christian ritual offered analogies—for example, the Roman *Robigalia*—and the Old Testament provided several examples of ritualised movement, music, and prayer to summon divine aid, such as the processions with the Ark of the Covenant.[15]

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[12] John F. BALDOVIN, *The Urban Character Of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development, and Meaning Of Stational Liturgy*, Rome, Pontifico Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987; Nathanael ANDRADE, "The Processions of John Chrysostom and the Contested Spaces of Constantinople", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 18 (2010), pp. 161-189; Luke LAVAN, *Public Space in the Late Antique City*, Leiden, Brill, 2021; Leslie BRUBAKER and Chris WICKHAM, "Processions, Power, and Community Identity: East and West", in Walter POHL (ed.), *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400-1000 CE*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 121-187.

[13] The classification of Christian processions has been the subject of considerable debate within modern scholarship. Recurrent processions could form part of a wider system: a "stational liturgy", where the principal mass of the day would be celebrated by the bishop or his representative in different churches within the city on specific days of an established liturgical calendar: BALDOVIN, op. cit., pp. 35-37; LAVAN, op. cit., pp. 214-217.

[14] LAVAN, op. cit., pp. 217-218; BRUBAKER and WICKHAM, op. cit., pp. 182-187.

[15] For instance, the famous procession of the Ark of the Covenant that brings about the destruction of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-20), the celebratory procession transferring the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:1-15; 1 Chronicles 15:16-28), or the chanting procession led by King Jehoshaphat of Judah at the head of his army to invoke divine assistance in war (2 Chronicles 20:20-23). Regarding pre-Christian rituals: Howard Hayes SCULLARD, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1981, pp. 21-30; 85-86; Walter BURKERT, *Greek Religion*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 77-80; 99–103;

By the mid-fifth century, evidence for Christian supplicatory processions becomes clearer.[16] Constantinople organised penitential processions after destructive earthquakes in AD 438 and 447.[17] In Gaul, Sidonius Apollinaris describes *rogationes* instituted by Bishop Mamertus at Vienne (c. AD 462-471) in response to calamities, later adopted at Clermont (c. AD 474) amid Visigothic incursions. These rituals—probably inspired both by pre-Christian and Old Testament models—likely helped communities to transform fear and uncertainty into a shared, visible response, strengthening cohesion and leadership.[18] Yet these early sources do not mention the involvement of relics in these processions.

The earliest processions that clearly involved relics were instead celebratory translations and receptions. Sozomen describes the translation of the body of Meletius to Antioch (c. AD 381), carried with honours and psalmody through cities in route. He also mentions a ceremony for the relics of John the Baptist held in Constantinople (c. AD 391)[19]. Chrysostom notes a reception of the relics of Saint Phocas (c. AD 403), while Socrates and Theodoret describe the reception of Chrysostom's relics (c. AD 438). These ceremonies likely drew on the logic of the *adventus*: An honour once granted to emperors and, from the third century, even to imperial portraits, extended in the mid-fourth century to bishops and later to relics, understood as bearers of saintly presence.[20]

Diane FAVRO, "The festive experience: Roman processions in the urban context", in Sarah BONNEMAISON and Christine MACY (eds.), *Festival Architecture*, London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 11-42; LAVAN, op. cit., 206-234.

[16] Apart from the case described by Egeria concerning Edessa, there is a possible reference to a penitential ritual (sackcloth, ashes, and prayer) during the Persian siege of Nisibis in AD 359, in a hymn attributed to Ephrem the Syrian. Although the reference is rather obscure and ambiguous, the author seems to imply that the city was saved through penitence: Charles RENOUX (trad.), *Éphrem de Nisibe. Mēmrē sur Nicomédie*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1975, hymn XV, 113, pp. 317-318. John Chrysostom, in turn, describes more clearly processions that were held in Constantinople around AD 399 after the crops had been damaged by storms: MIGNE PG 56, 263-270; Wendy MAYER, *Homilies of St John Chrysostom: Provenance, Reshaping the Foundations, Rome*, Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum., 2005, pp. 95-96; LAVAN, op. cit., pp. 217-218.

[17] *CHRONICON PASCHALE,* 586.6, edited by Ludwig DINDORF, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Bonn, Weber, 1832; THEOPHANES CONFESSOR, *Chronographia*, 93, edited by Carl DE BOOR, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1883-1885; *SYNAXARIUM ECCLESIAE CONSTANTINOPOLITANAE*, 78.18, edited by Hippolyte DELEHAYE, Brussels, Société des Bollandistes, 1902; Glanville DOWNEY, "Earthquakes at Constantinople and Vicinity, A.D. 342-1454." *Speculum*, 30, 4 (1955), pp. 596-600; Brian CROKE, "Two Early Byzantine Earthquakes and Their Liturgical Commemoration", *Byzantion*, 51 (1981), pp. 122-147; LAVAN, op. cit., pp. 217-218; BRUBAKER and WICKHAM, op. cit., pp. 121-153.

[18] SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS, *Epistulae*, VII.1.2-7, edited and translated by William Blair ANDERSON, *Loeb Classical Library* 420, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1965, pp. 286-291; Sidonius (*Epistulae*, VII.1.3) explicitly refers to the example of Nineveh, alluding to the penitential rituals described in Jonah 3:5–6, as a model for the Christian *rogationes* held in Vienne and Clermont.

[19] SOZOMEN, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII.10 and 21, edited by Joseph BIDEZ and Günther Christian HANSEN, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1960.

[20] JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In martyrem Phocam, Patrologia Graeca 50*, cols. 699-700; SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII.45, edited by Günther Christian HANSEN, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 38*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1995; THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V.36, edited by Leon PARMENTIER and Günther Christian HANSEN, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 44*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1998; LAVAN, op. cit., pp 156-157.

Supplicatory Processions with Relics in the Byzantine World

Clear evidence for supplicatory relic processions in the Eastern Roman Empire begins in the mid-sixth century, alongside a broader use of relics by imperial and military elites. Evagrios Scholastikos (c. AD 593) reports that the general Philippikos requested relics of Symeon the Stylite to protect the eastern armies—an early instance of relics being used as protection by a field army rather than a city.[21] Theophylact Simocatta describes Emperor Maurikios displaying a fragment of the True Cross during the ceremony for an army's departure (c. AD 596-598), making him the first ruler clearly attested using a Christian relic in a military context.[22]

In the same decades, sources increasingly attest the use of *acheiropoieta*—images "not made by human hands"—in ritual and sometimes processional settings, especially in Palestine, Syria, and Anatolia. As secondary or contact relics, these objects stand historically between the cult of relics and the later veneration of icons.[23] Evagrios recounts that during the Persian siege of Edessa in AD 544 a miraculous image of Christ was used in a protective rite; this is usually identified with the Mandylion associated with the Abgar legend.[24] Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor (c. AD 568) narrates the discovery of another miraculous image near the village of Camulia in Cappadocia, later known as the Camuliana. After Diobulion (Pontus) was destroyed by barbarians around AD 554, the locals carried the image in

[21] EVAGRIUS SCHOLASTICUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.13, edited by Joseph BIDEZ and Léon PARMENTIER, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca* 44, Turnhout, Brepols, 2001. While the historicity of the request is uncertain, its narrative plausibility suggests that by the late sixth century, the notion of using relics for the protection of armies already existed and was becoming accepted.

[22] THEOPHYLACT SIMOCATTA, *Historiae*, V.16.11-12, edited by Carl DE BOOR, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1887; Anatole FROLOW, *La relique de la Vraie Croix. Recherches sur le développement d'un culte*, Paris, Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, 1961, p. 79; Holger A. KLEIN, *Byzanz, der Westen und das »wahre« Kreuz. Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland,* Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004; Holger A. KLEIN, "Constantine, Helena, and the Cult of the True Cross in Constantinople", in Jannic DURAND and Bernard FLUSIN (ed.), *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, Paris, Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2004, pp. 31-59; Joaquín SERRANO DEL POZO, "The Cross-standard of Emperor Maurice (582-602)", *Diogenes*, 11 (2021), pp. 1-17; Michał PIETRANIK, "Saints and Sacred Objects in Eastern Roman Imperial Warfare. The Case of Maurice (582-602)", in Robert WIŚNIEWSKI, Raymond VAN DAM and Bryan WARD-PERKINS (eds.), *Interacting with Saints in the Late Antique and Medieval Worlds*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2023, pp. 229-247.

[23] Ernst KITZINGER, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8, Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University, 1954, pp. 83-150; Leslie BRUBAKER, "Icons before Iconoclasm?", in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa tra tarda Antichità e alto Medioevo*, Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo XLV, Spoleto, Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1998, pp. 1215-1254; Bissera V PENTCHEVA, "What Is a Byzantine Icon? Constantinople versus Sinai," in Paul STEPHENSON (ed.), *The Byzantine World*, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 265-283; Alexei M LIDOV, "Icons Made of Relics: Creating Holy Matter in Byzantium", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 75/76, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021, pp. 91-100; Serrano DEL POZO, "Sacred Images At War", *Eventum*, in press (2026).

[24] EVAGRIUS SCHOLASTICUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV.27, pp. 174-176; Steven RUNCIMAN, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa," *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 3, 3 (1931), pp. 238-252; KITZINGER, op. cit., pp. 83-150; Averil CAMERON, "The History of the Image of Edessa: The Telling of a Story," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 7 (1983), pp. 80-94; Mark GUSCIN, *The Image of Edessa*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 165-176.

procession across Asia Minor to raise funds for rebuilding the sanctuary. Kitzinger once interpreted such displays through the lens of imperial portrait cult and eschatological expectation, yet the narrative logic also fits a supplicatory framework: Procession, penitence, and acts of expiation and appeal for protection.[25]

Theophylact Simocatta reports that at the battle of Solachon (AD 586) Philippikos unveiled and displayed an *acheiropoieton* before the troops, strengthening morale and courage through the object's perceived divine power. He also notes that Priskos later used the same object, unsuccessfully, to pacify mutinous soldiers.[26] The eleventh-century chronicler Kedrenos claims that Justin II transferred the Camuliana image to Constantinople in AD 574; whether this is the same object later used by Philippikos and Priskos is uncertain.[27] What is clear is that by the later sixth century these relic-images and their ritual deployment had become increasingly common.

The most emblematic Constantinopolitan case is the Avar-Persian siege of AD 626. With Emperor Herakleios campaigning in Persia, the patrician Bonos and Patriarch Sergios organised the city's defence. Sergios led a supplicatory procession along the walls with an *acheiropoieton* of Christ.[28] A homily attributed to Synkellos compares the image to the Ark of the Covenant and notes that images of the Virgin and Child were painted on gates as protective amulets.[29] Multiple sources also credit the Virgin's intervention, especially through her church at Blachernae, where the Robe of the Virgin was kept.[30]

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[25] PSEUDO-ZACHARIAH RHETOR, *Chronicle*, XII, edited by Geoffrey GREATREX, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2011, pp. 425-427; KITZINGER, op. cit., pp. 99-100.
[26] THEOPHYLACT SIMOCATTA, Historiae, II.3.4-9; III.1.7-12.
[27] KEDRENOS, *Compendium Historiarum*, edited by Immanuel BEKKER, Bonn, Weber, 1838, pp. 685–686; Ernst von DOBSCHÜTZ, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*, Leipzig, J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1899, p. 18; KITZINGER, op. cit., p. 111.
[28] Norman H. BAYNES, "The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople," *Analecta Bollandiana*, 67 (1949), pp. 165-177; Franjo BARIŠIĆ, "Le Siège de Constantinople par les Avares et les Slaves en 626," *Byzantion*, 24 (1954), pp. 371-395; Averil CAMERON, "The Virgin's Robe: An Episode in the History of Early Seventh-Century Constantinople," *Byzantion*, 49 (1979), pp. 42-56; Paul SPECK, *Zufälliges zum Bellum Avaricum des Georgios Pisides*, Munich, Institut für Byzantinistik, Neugriechische Philologie und Byzantinische Kunstgeschichte der Universität, 1980; James HOWARD-JOHNSTON, "The Siege of Constantinople in 626," in Cyril MANGO and Gilbert DAGRON (eds.), *Constantinople and its Hinterland*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1995, pp. 131-142; Bissera V. PENTCHEVA, "The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople: The Virgin and Her Icons in the Tradition of the Avar Siege," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 26 (2002), pp. 1-41; José MARÍN RIVEROS, "Bizancio en el siglo VII: entre historia y profecía. Notas en torno a los sucesos del año 626", *Byzantion Nea Hellás*, 30 (2011), pp. 41-73; Martin HURBANIČ, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626: History and Legend*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Michael WHITBY, "Theodore Syncellus and the 626 Siege of Constantinople," *Electrum*, 29 (2022), pp. 285-300.
[29] THEODORE SYNCELLUS, *Homily on the Siege*, 15-17, edited by Leo STERNBACH, Kraków, Analecta Avarica, 1900; HURBANIČ, op. cit., pp. 181-338; WHITBY, op. cit., pp. 285-300.
[30] CHRONICON PASCHALE, p. 725; GEORGE OF PISIDIA, *Bellum Avaricum*, edited by Agostino PERTUSI, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1959, pp. 453-455; THEODORE SYNCELLUS, *Homily on the Siege*, pp. 24-33, 52. Regarding this sanctuary: Raymond JANIN, *Les Églises et les Monastères des grands centres*

Here the Robe still functioned primarily as a static *palladium*, protecting from within its sanctuary rather than being carried out.[31] Nevertheless, both George Pisides' poetry and Synkellos' homily emphasise the patriarch's processional display of the *acheiropoieton*, carried through streets and along walls, accompanied by clergy and laity chanting psalms and prayers in the face of enemy forces.[32] Synkellos explicitly aligns Sergios with Moses, the image with the Ark, and the siege with Israel's wars.[33]

The ritual likely drew on shared Mediterranean processional culture, local precedents for penitential processions after disasters, circulating accounts of comparable rituals (including Apamea), and Old Testament models. Scholarship has shown how performative processions displayed authority, generate collective memory, unify communities, and reinforce leadership in moments of crisis. In AD 626 the acheiropoietic image functioned both as apotropaic talisman and as a performative emblem of patriarchal authority in the emperor's absence.[34]

After AD 626, references to similar rituals are scarce until the early eighth century. This suggests that, although such practices existed from the mid-sixth century, they were not yet fully consolidated by the mid-seventh. During the Arab-Islamic conquests and Slavic incursions, sources continue to attribute protection to saints and relics, but typically without describing relics carried in supplicatory processions: Relics again appear primarily as static *palladia*.[35] A new reference emerges with the second Arab siege of Constantinople (AD 717-

byzantins, Paris, Institut français d'études byzantines, 1951, pp. 161-171; Annemarie Weyl CARR, "Soros," *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991; Cyril A. MANGO, "The Origins of the Blachernae Shrine at Constantinople," *Acta XIII Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae*, Vaticano, Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1998, pp. 61-76; Henry MAGUIRE, "Body, Clothing, Metaphor: the Virgin in Early Byzantine Art", in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, London, New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 39-51.

[31] From the perspective of the Byzantine sources, it was the Blachernae church itself—conceived as a grand reliquary—that focused the supernatural aid of the Theotokos, summoning her intercession and triggering the Avar fleet's destruction. This notion likely arose from the conjunction of two events: in AD 623, the Robe had to be temporarily removed from this sanctuary due to an Avar raid, and during the siege of AD 626, the Avar fleet sank near the sanctuary. For the Constantinopolitans, it must have seemed self-evident that the Virgin was punishing the attackers for their repeated threats and offences against her holy sanctuary and relic: CARR, "Soros," op. cit.; HURBANIČ, op. cit., pp. 153-164.

[32] GEORGE OF PISIDIA, *Bellum Avaricum*, pp. 366-379; THEODORE SYNKELLOS, *Homily of the Siege*, 15-17.

[33] THEODORE SYNCELLUS, *Homily of the Siege*, 15-17; MARÍN RIVEROS, op. cit., pp. 41-73; WHITBY, "Theodore Syncellus and the 626 Siege of Constantinople", pp. 285-300.

[34] Leslie BRUBAKER, "Topography and the Creation of Public Space in Early Medieval Constantinople," in Mayke DE JONG, Frans THEUWS and Carine VAN RHIJN (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2001, pp. 42-43; Rebecca FALCASANTOS, *Constantinople: Ritual, Violence, and Memory in the Making of a Christian Imperial Capital,* Oakland (CA), University of California Press, 2020, pp. 15-45; Lavan, op. cit., p. 225; Brubaker and Wickham, op. cit., pp. 121-182.

[35] Paul LEMERLE, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de saint Démétrius et la pénétration des Slaves dans les Balkans. I: Le texte*, Paris, Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1979, pp. 120-241; John HALDON, *A*

718). Byzantine chroniclers omit the episode, likely because later iconophile authors wished to avoid depicting Emperor Leo III (AD 717-741), later associated with Iconoclasm, as a pious ruler.[36] The Armenian history attributed to Łewond describes a penitential procession in which Leo III paraded a relic of the True Cross through the city and towards the shore, an episode corroborated by other sources.[37]

From the mid-eighth to early eleventh centuries, testimonies of similar practices multiply. Sources mention relic processions during the sieges of Thomas the Slav (c. AD 822-823) and the Rus (AD 860), and a related ritual during the Bulgarian crisis of AD 923.[38] Moreover, the lack of other references does not imply the absence of such processions: as these practices became customary, authors may have recorded them only when circumstances were exceptional or when mentioning these rituals was ideologically or rhetorically significant.[39]

A notable ninth-century development is the mobilisation of the Marian relic of Blachernae. The accounts of Thomas' siege report that Michael II ordered his son Theophilos to lead a procession carrying a fragment of the True Cross and the Robe of the Virgin from Blachernae.[40] Photios, preaching on the Rus' assault, depicts the Robe embracing the walls and prompting the enemy's sudden flight.[41] The *Chronicle of the Logothete* records a ritual strikingly similar to that described for AD 717-718 for the Rus attack of AD 860. The same source mentions

Tale of Two Saints: The Martyrdoms and Miracles of Saints Theodore "the Recruit and 'the General", Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2016, pp. 20-57.

[36] The first to argue this was Stephen Gero, an idea later supported by other scholars such as Marić, Haldon and Brubaker: Stephen GERO, *Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Leo III: With Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*, Louvain, Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973, pp. 32-43; Leslie BRUBAKER and John HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 69-155; Ivan MARIĆ, *Iconoclast Imperial Authority and Its Contested Legacy: Ffrom the Arab Siege (717/18) until the Death of Michael III (867)*, Doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2021, pp. 7-60.

[37] The main source describing the procession is the Armenian chronicle of Łewond. For other sources that offer indirect evidence supporting the historicity of the procession, see the bibliography in the preceding note: ŁEWOND, *History*, 24–26, edited by Sergio LA PORTA and Alison M. VACCA, Chicago, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, 2024, pp. 208-213.

[38] For the siege of Thomas: GENESIOS, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, II.5.55-61, edited by Anthony KALDELLIS, Canberra, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1998, pp. 34-35; THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, *Chronographia*, II.59.14, edited by Michael FEATHERSTONE and Juan SIGNES-CODOÑER, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, pp. 88-89; For the attack of the Rus of Kiev: PHOTIUS, *Homily IV*, 2, 41-42, edited by Cyril MANGO, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press (Dumbarton Oaks), 1958, pp. 102-103; CHRONICLE OF THE LOGOTHETE, 131.30, edited by Staffan WAHLGREN, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 44*, New York, De Gruyter, 2006. For the Bulgarian siege of AD 923: CHRONICLE OF THE LOGOTHETE, 136:32.

[39] For instance, the procession during the Second Arab Siege is omitted by iconodule Byzantine chroniclers such as Theophanes and Patriarch Nikephoros, whereas the procession held during the siege of Thomas the Slav is mentioned by later writers, possibly because they relied on an imperial panegyric that exalted Michael II—the lost poem *On Thomas*: Franjo BARIŠIĆ, "Les sources de Génésios et du Continuateur de Théophane pour l'histoire du règne de Michel II (820–829)", *Byzantion* 31, 1961, pp. 257-271; Paul LEMERLE, "Thomas le Slave", *Travaux et Mémoires 1*, Paris, Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation Byzantines, 1965, p. 268; Warren TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 78-196.

[40] GENESIOS, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, II.5.55–61; THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, *Chronographia*, II.59.14.

[41] PHOTIUS, *Homily IV*, 2, 41-42, pp. 102-103.

later another significant episode: Romanos Lekapenos clothed himself in the Robe of the Virgin as a kind of armour when negotiating with Simeon I of Bulgaria outside the walls.[42]

Relics also featured in responses to disasters. The procession linked to the earthquake of AD 740—or to the repair of collapsed wall sections—mentioned in the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai* and depicted in the *Menologion of Basil II*, likely involved a reliquary cross containing a fragment of the True Cross.[43] Skylitzes reports that during a drought around AD 1037, Michael IV processed from the palace to Blachernae with the Mandylion, the Letter of Christ to Abgar, and Christ's swaddling bands; the first two were major relics recently acquired by rulers of the previous century.[44]

Finally, the *Book of Ceremonies* attests an annual apotropaic circuit of the True Cross (28 July-13 August), explicitly linked to the sanctification of the city and its defences: "The cross begins on July 28th to go around and to sanctify every place and every house of this God-guarded and Imperial City, but especially the walls themselves, so that both his City and the whole area around it are filled with grace and holiness." There are good reasons to think this feast emerged in the seventh or eighth century as a ritual response to invasions, sieges, or natural disasters.[45]

Taken together, these testimonies point to a gradual shift from relics as passive protectors to relics as mobile ritual instruments. This shift did not eliminate the older belief that mere presence protects, and it did not unfold uniformly across the empire. Tenth-century translation homilies still stress the peace and stability conferred simply by relics dwelling in

[42] CHRONICLE OF THE LOGOTHETE, 131.30; 136.32.

[43] PARASTASEIS SYNTOMOI CHRONIKAI, 3, edited by Averil CAMERON and Judith HERRIN, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1984, p. 59; MENOLOGION OF BASIL II (c. AD 979-1025), Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1613, fol. 142.

[44] JOHN SKYLITZES, *Synopsis historiarum*, Michael IV, 10, edited by Hans THURN, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1973, p. 400; Steven RUNCIMAN, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa", Cambridge Historical Journal, 3/3 (1931), pp. 238-252; Averil CAMERON, "The History of the Image of Edessa: The Telling of a Story", Harvard Ukrainian Studies 7, 1983, pp. 80–94; Mark GUSCIN, The Image of Edessa, Leiden–Boston, Brill, 2009; Christopher SPRECHER, *Emperor and God: Passion Relics and the Divinisation of Byzantine Rulers, 944–1204*, Heidelberg, Heidelberg University Publishing, 2024, pp. 13-74.

[45] CONSTANTINE VII PORPHYROGENITUS, *De ceremoniis*, II.8, translated by Ann MOFFATT and Maxeme TALL, Canberra, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012, vol. 2, pp. 538-541. The feast is first mentioned in the *Kletorologion*, compiled around AD 899, which survives as an appendix of the *Book of Ceremonies* (II. 52, p. 723). According to Theophanes, some sections of the walls collapsed during the earthquake of AD 740, and the tremors following the main shock continued for several months. It is easy to imagine such circumstances as the context in which this ritual was first established: THEOPHANES CONFESSOR, *Chronographia*, 412-413, edited by Carl DE BOOR, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1883-1885.

Constantinople.[46] Local divergence mattered. Thessaloniki appears reluctant to bring out and display Demetrios' relics, developing instead practices centred on the myrrh drawn from the saint's tomb.[47] Skylitzes reports that when Bulgarians besieged Thessaloniki in AD 1040, locals held a night vigil at Demetrios' tomb and anointed themselves with the sacred myrrh; then they opened the gates and defeated the besiegers, with witnesses seeing "a young horseman leading the Roman ranks, exuding a fire which burnt up the enemies.[48]"

Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, Byzantine supplicatory processions with relics continued, and from roughly the mid–tenth century icons of the Theotokos increasingly assumed similar commemorative and apotropaic functions. By the twelfth century the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria—treated in tradition as a secondary relic painted by Saint Luke—became Constantinople's principal *palladium* until its destruction in 1453. Epithets long applied to relics, such as "invincible weapons," "fellow-generals," were increasingly applied in Byzantium to Marian icons.[49]

Processions with Relics in the Latin West

The belief in the protective power of relics, and the development of Christian processional liturgy, emerged across the Mediterranean world between the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Paulinus and Augustine show that apotropaic expectations were not confined to the "East.[50]" *Rogationes* appear in Gaul by the later fifth century, but there is no evidence of relics involvement in these early rituals.[51] The first known supplicatory procession with relics in the West is Gregory of Tours' story about Zaragoza.[52]

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[46] ARETHAS OF CAESAREA, *Scripta minora*, Opus 58; 59, edited by Leendert G. WESTERINK, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1968–1972; NARRATIO DE IMAGINE EDESSENA, edited by E. von DOBSCHÜTZ, op. cit., pp. 29-129; THEODORE DAPHNOPATES, *Oratio de translatione manus*, edited by Ioli KALAVREZOU, op. cit., pp. 53-79.
[47] James C. SKEDROS, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Civic Patron and Divine Protector, 4th-7th Centuries CE*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 1999; Charalambos BAKIRTZIS, "Pilgrimage to Thessalonike: The Tomb of St Demetrios," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 56 (2002), pp. 175-192.
[48] JOHN SKYLITZES, *Synopsis historiarum*, Michael IV, 27, translated by John WORTLEY, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 388.
[49] Robert Lee WOLFF, "Footnote to an Incident of the Latin Occupation of Constantinople: The Church and the Icon of the Hodegetria," *Traditio*, 6 (1948), pp. 319-328; Maria VASSILAKI (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, London, Routledge, 2005; Anthony KALDELLIS, "The Military Use of the Icon of the Theotokos and its Moral Logic in the Historians of the Ninth-Twelfth Centuries," *Estudios bizantinos*, 1 (2013), pp. 56-75.
[50] PAULINUS OF NOLA, *Carmen 19*, 142–143; AUGUSTINE, *Sermo 296*, cols. 1359-1365; WIŚNIEWSKI, op. cit., pp. 48-69.
[51] SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS, *Epistulae*, VII.1.2-7, pp. 286–291; BALDOVIN, op. cit., pp 229-268; ANDRADE, op. cit., pp. 161-189; LAVAN, op. cit., pp. 150-234; BRUBAKER and WICKHAM, op. cit., pp. 121-187.
[52] GREGORY OF TOURS, *Historiae*, III.29.

Gregory's wider *corpus* illustrates how thoroughly relic power permeated late sixth-century imagination. He recounts various protective miracles associated with Martin of Tours and describes how a medallion containing saints' ashes protected him and his family from bandits, fires, storms, and other hazards.[53] He describes placing wax from a candle burned at Martin's tomb (a contact relic) in a vine to protect it from hail.[54] Yet it is striking that, beyond Zaragoza, Gregory offers only one other clear example of a supplicatory procession with relics: in *Glory of the Confessors* he describes a plague procession at Reims involving a cloth (*palla*) that had covered the tomb of Saint Remigius.[55] This pattern suggests a practice that existed but was not yet ubiquitous: relics still tended to operate mainly as stationary focus of protection.[56]

As in the East, celebratory relic processions were also known in the West. Gregory mentions a procession for the restoration to Orbigny of relics of Vincent that had been unlawfully removed.[57] By the second half of the seventh century, processions with relics were common enough in Hispania to attract ecclesiastical regulation: a canon of the Third Council of Braga (AD 675) forbids bishops, on martyrs' festivals, to be carried by deacons while seated in chairs with relics hanging around their necks, as if the bishops themselves were reliquaries. The canon implies that carrying relics on foot was the proper practice.[58]

A Frankish hagiography, the *Passio Leudegarii* (c. AD 680-684), provides an example of a procession during a siege. When Ebroin's forces, led by Bishop Diddo of Chalon, besieged Autun around AD 675-676, Bishop Leudegar mobilised the townspeople, proclaimed a three-day fast, and carried relics of unnamed saints around the circuit of the walls, stopping at each gate for prayers of supplication.[59] Unlike Gregory's Zaragoza story, the narrative

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[53] GREGORY OF TOURS, *De gloria martyrum*, 83, edited by Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Merov. I.2, Hannover, Hahn, 1885, pp. 351-352; English translation by Raymond VAN DAM, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1988, pp. 79-80.

[54] GREGORY OF TOURS, *De virtutibus sancti Martini*, 34, edited by Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Merov. I.2, 2nd ed., Hannover, Hahn, 1969, p. 154. Gregory also mentions various other examples of saints protecting people, towns or regions, for instance: Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, 12; 43; 51; 59; 75; 77; *Miracles of Saint Martin*, 2; 9; 10; 11; 14; 27; GREGORY OF TOURS, *De gloria confessorum*, 2; 22; 44, edited by Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Merov. I.2, 2nd ed., Hannover, Hahn, 1969.

[55] GREGORY OF TOURS, *De gloria confessorum*, 78.

[56] Considering that one of the cases comes from Northern Spain, is possible to speculate that this practice may have developed first around Hispania. However, beyond Gregory's description of the siege of Zaragoza, no other evidence of similar rituals survives for the region. For instance, Hispanic chroniclers such as Hydatius, John of Biclar, or Isidore of Seville make no mention of similar rituals or ceremonies.

[57] GREGORY OF TOURS, *De gloria martyrum*, 89.

[58] Third Council of Braga, Canon 5, in: José VIVES (ed.), *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos*, Barcelona–Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1963, pp. 365-376.

[59] *PASSIO LEUDEGARII I*, 22, edited by Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Merov. V, Hannover, Hahn, 1910, pp. 303–304; English translation in Paul FOURACRE and Richard A. GERBERDING, *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 238-239.

treats the rite as conventional – one of many expressions of Leudegar's piety during the siege—suggesting that such rituals were probably becoming more common in the Latin West during the seventh century.[60]

Eighth-century Rome offers another key case, notable for its focus. The *Liber Pontificalis* reports that after repeated Lombard threats against Rome, Pope Stephen II organised a barefoot penitential procession to Santa Maria Maggiore, carrying an acheiropoietic image and, possibly, other relics (*sacra mysteria*)[61]. The context was not a proper siege, but it sought protection against imminent invasion and resembles Byzantine uses of miraculous images. The image is commonly identified with the *acheiropoieton* preserved in the Lateran Sancta Sanctorum. Late Roman traditions linked it to Byzantine Iconoclasm, but scholars such as von Dobschütz and Belting argued instead for a Roman origin between the late sixth and mid-seventh centuries, when references to miraculous images spread widely in the Mediterranean; the *Liber Pontificalis* passage is the earliest explicit textual reference of this object.[62]

Whether or not the image came from Byzantium, the performance of a supplicatory procession with an acheiropoieton can be contextualised within Rome's mid-eighth-century position within what may be described as a Byzantine sphere of influence.[63] Papal-patriarchal correspondence referenced earlier sieges of Constantinople, and it is plausible that Roman ritual imagination was shaped by stories circulating about Constantinopolitan processions during the Avar-Persian and Arab sieges.[64] At some point between the seventh and ninth century, the Roman image began to be carried regularly in procession on the Assumption (15

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[60] *PASSIO LEUDEGARII I*, p. 304: *Commovens igitur universum urbis illius populum, cum triduano ieiunio, cum signo crucis et reliquiis sanctorum murorum circumiens ambitum, per singulos etenim aditos portarum terrae adherens, Dominum praecabatur cum lacrimis, ut, si illum vocabat ad passionem, plebem sibi creditam non permitterit captivari, et ita praestatum est evenisse*.

[61] *LIBER PONTIFICALIS,* 94 (Stephen II), 10-11, edited by Louis DUCHESNE, *Le Liber Pontificalis: Texte, introduction et commentaire, 2 vols*, Paris, E. Thorin, 1886-1892, pp. 442-443; English translation in Raymond DAVIS, *The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes,* Translated Texts for Historians, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2007, p. 56.

[62] DOBSCHÜTZ, op. cit., pp. 64-68; KITZINGER, op. cit., pp. 83-150; Gerhard WOLF, *Salus Populi Romani: Die Geschichte römischer Kultbilder im Mittelalter*, Weinheim, Wiley-VCH GmbH, 1990, pp. 3-78; Hans BELTING, *Likeness and Presence*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 65-68; Gerhard WOLF and Renato NICOLINI (eds.), *Il volto di Cristo. Catalogo della mostra a Roma, Palazzo delle Esposizioni*, Rome, Electa Editrice, 2000, pp. 39-45.

[63] Thomas S. BROWN, "Byzantine Italy, 680-876," in: John SHEPARD (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c. 500-1492*, Cambridge, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008, pp. 433-464.

[64] For instance, the letter of Pope Gregory II to Patriarch Germanos that was included in the acts of the Second Council of Nicaea: Richard PRICE, ed., *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*, TTH, Liverpool, LUP, 2018, pp. 327-334; Leslie BRUBAKER and John HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680-850: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 90-91

August). The *Liber Pontificalis* also suggests later use—for example, under Leo IV (AD 847-855), who processed against a plague allegedly caused by a basilisk.[65]

From the late ninth and tenth centuries, references to relic processions during sieges increase in the Frankish kingdoms. Abbo of Saint-Germain's poem *Bella Parisiacae Urbis* suggests that during the Viking siege of Paris in AD 885-886, Genevieve's relics were carried in procession around the walls to invoke her intercession.[66] This likely drew on two strands of memory: a sixth-century *Vita* in which Genevieve saves Paris from Attila's Huns (in AD 451) through fasts and vigils, and a ninth-century miracle collection describing the removal of Genevieve's relics during an earlier Viking raid (probably AD 845) that pillaged and burned her church, followed by miracles during their exile and a celebratory restoration procession.[67]

Radbod of Utrecht, in the *Miracles of Saint Martin of Tours*, reports that during the Viking siege of Tours in AD 903, Martin's relics were taken from the tomb in a small chest-reliquary and carried in procession around walls and gates. After prayers and supplications, defenders' courage increased and the besiegers were struck with confusion and terror, abandoning the siege.[68] Here, as in Constantinople and Paris, one can observe a transition from static to mobile protection. Saint Martin had long been imagined as Tours' protector, for instance in Gregory of Tours' writings, but Radbod offers the first clear report of Martin's relics being removed and carried in a procession, a development closely comparable to the ninth-century Byzantine mobilisation of the Virgin's Robe.[69]

By the tenth century, processions with relics and related protective rites during sieges, disasters, and other calamities seem to have become widespread across the Euro-Mediterranean world, remaining customary into the later Middle Ages and early modern

[65] *LIBER PONTIFICALIS*, 105, 18-19, p. 110; BELTING, op. cit., pp. 65-68; 498-499.
[66] ABBO OF SAINT-GERMAIN, *Bella Parisiacae urbis*, II.247-248, edited by Paul VON WINTERFELD, MGH, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini* 4.1, Berlin, Weidmann, 1899, p. 105; English translation in Anthony ADAMS and A. G. RIGG, "A Verse Translation of Abbo of St Germain's 'Bella Parisiacae urbis'," *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 14 (2004), pp. 9-50.
[67] Jo Ann McNAMARA, John E. HALBORG, and E. Gordon WHATLEY (eds.), *Women of the Dark Ages*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 17-37; Moshe SLUHOVSKY, op. cit., pp. 11-28, 46-54; *Miracula Sanctae Genovefae postmortem*, in: *Acta Sanctorum*, January I, Société des Bollandistes, Paris, Garnandet, 1863, pp. 149-151; SLUHOVSKY, op. cit., pp. 11-28, 46-54.
[68] RADBOD OF UTRECHT, *Miracula sancti Martini Turonensis*, 5-6, edited by Oswald HOLDER-EGGER, MGH, SS 15.2, Hannover, Hahn, 1888, p. 1243; Sharon FARMER, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours*, London, Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 38-188, 305-209; Yossi MAUREY, *Medieval Music, Legend and the Cult of St. Martin. The Local Foundations of a Universal Saint*, Cambridge, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014, pp.109-118.
[69] GREGORY OF TOURS, *Historiae*, II.37; IV.48, pp. 85-88, 184-185; English translation by THORPE, op. cit., pp. 151-154, 244-245; GREGORY OF TOURS, *De virtutibus sancti Martini*, II.27, p. 169; English translation by VAN DAM, op. cit., pp. 242-243.

period.[70] The aim here is not exhaustive enumeration, but to use comparative cases to draw preliminary conclusions about origins, development, and function.

Conclusions

First, although the evidence is limited, supplicatory processions with Christian relics appear to have emerged broadly in parallel in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Latin West. Apart from possible Byzantine influence on Roman processions with acheiropoietic images, there is little sign of direct imitation. Comparable practices instead developed from shared Late Antique foundations: belief in relics' protective power, the processional character of Christian liturgy, and Old Testament models.

Second, evidence between the sixth and eighth centuries is scarce and scattered, implying a gradual shift from relics as largely passive, static *palladia* to relics as portable and ritualised talismans. The Robe of the Virgin at Blachernae and Martin's relics at Tours exemplify this shift: both were long believed to protect their cities from within their sanctuaries, yet later appear in supplicatory processions during sieges in the ninth and tenth centuries. What prompted the transformation, how widespread it became, and whether it was confined to especially prominent cities and relics remain uncertain. A plausible mechanism is narrative circulation: stories that attributed salvation to relics or holy images in earlier crises encouraged later communities to integrate such objects into established rites of supplication. Another plausible factor is the growing prominence of relics in other processional contexts – regular liturgical processions, thanksgiving rites, and translations – providing ritual templates that could be reactivated in emergencies.

The cases of Blachernae and Genevieve's relics show how narrative, commemoration, and ritual could reinforce one another. In Constantinople, the Robe was removed from Blachernae in AD 623 during an Avar raid and later restored with thanksgiving. In AD 626 the relic itself was not processed, but the destruction of the Avar fleet at Blachernae generated an influential interpretation: The Virgin punished impious barbarians for offences against her sanctuary and city. This meaning circulated widely in chronicles, homilies, and poetry, reinforced by liturgical commemoration, consolidating the Virgin—and her relic at Blachernae—as the city's guardian. When besieged again in the ninth century, including the now-famous Robe in a supplicatory procession likely appeared natural. In Paris, Genevieve's reputation as protectress initially developed through narratives of her life rather than through

[70] For examples of these in late medieval and early modern France: SLUHOVSKY, op. cit., pp. 90-214.

public relic ritual; the removal of her relics in a Viking raid (c. AD 845) generated miracles and strengthened the association between relic and protection, making a supplicatory relic procession in 885-886 a plausible and "logical" action.

Yet other cases, such as Thessaloniki, where Demetrios' relics were apparently not processed (at least before the twelfth century), despite his role as military guardian, demonstrates that the rise of supplicatory relic processions was not universal. Local ritual traditions mattered, and communities could cultivate alternative ways of materialising saintly protection (such as Demetrios' myrrh). More broadly, the increasing public use of relics in civic life should be read as one expression among several of the gradual processes of Christianisation, sacralisation, and "liturgification" of Euro-Mediterranean societies between the sixth and eleventh centuries.[71]

Third, comparison helps to clarifies sociocultural function. Scholarship has often interpreted the military use of relics as evidence for an ideology of holy war. The cases discussed here complicate that reading. Processions with relics occur in conflicts between Christian polities (Franks besieging Zaragoza) and in episodes that resemble civil war or internal conflict (Thomas the Slav; the siege of Autun). Even when besiegers were non-Christian (Avars, Vikings), their religious identity is rarely emphasised and is not consistently linked to the ritual action. These rituals were oriented primarily inward: they sought intercession and divine help in moments of acute danger, within a cosmology where relics mediated miraculous power. In this respect, siege processions resemble processions organised in response to earthquakes, drought, hail, or plague. In both contexts communities faced hazards that seemed beyond human control. Processions offered a way to seek divine assistance while reaffirming cohesion and collective identity. By moving, praying, and gathering around revered relics, participants expressed dependence on God and recognised themselves as a unified community acting together.

[71] Regarding these concepts: Averil CAMERON, "Images of authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-century Byzantium," *Past & Present*, 84 (1979), pp. 3-35; John F. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: the Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; Mischa MEIER, *Justinian: Herrschaft, Reich und Religion*, München, C.H. Beck, 2004; Mischa MEIER, "The Roman Context of Early Islam," *Millennium*, 17, 1 (2020), pp. 265-302; Mischa, MEIER, "The Justinianic Plague: The Economic Consequences of the Pandemic in the Eastern Roman Empire and Its Cultural and Religious Effects," *Early Medieval Europe*, 24, 3 (2016), pp. 267-292. For the Christianisation of the Latin-West: Julia M. H. SMITH, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000*, Oxford, OUP, 2005; Peter BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A. D. 200-1000*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2013; Judith, HERRIN, *The Formation of Christendom*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013. For a more general approach: Thomas F. X. NOBLE and Julia M. H. SMITH (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity, vol. 3: Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600-c. 1100*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Within these rituals relics functioned as powerful focal points of attention and as markers of collective identity. Recent work by archaeologists and anthropologists has elaborated the notion of "charismatic objects," drawing from the theory of the agency of things, Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura," and Max Weber's idea of "charisma." Following Marianne Vedeler and Martin Radermacher, "charismatic objects" are material items that, given a particular cosmological frame, are endowed with agency and the ability to cast an aura of extraordinary power, reverence, and awe. Radermacher has argued that this concept can be applied to Christian relics, understood as the authentic remnants of holy figures, to which powers are attributed and reverence is given.[72]

In supplicatory processions relics acted as visible and tangible centres around which communal prayer, movement, and emotion were organised. Their material presence focused attention, structured collective action, and embodied shared expectations of divine protection. In that sense, relics functioned not only as objects of devotion but also as ritual instruments that helped communities recognise themselves as unified bodies in moments of crisis, transforming uncertainty into socially usable forms of resilience or action.

The concept of charismatic objects also foregrounds the interplay between object, narrative, and power. Vedeler writes: "These [charismatic] objects are carriers of collective narratives that help to stabilize, maintain, and create community and relationships of power," while Radermacher observes that "just like the communications around an object are powerless without the object, the object is powerless without these narrations. Both mutually enhance their respective socio-cultural agency.[73]" Stories of relic processions that saved cities from sieges or communities from calamities circulated in chronicles, poems, and sermons, were reinforced by commemorative feasts, and shaped expectations for future crises. These narratives did not merely record ritual action; they gave it meaning, intensified its efficacy in social terms, and helped consolidate both the cult of particular relics and the identities of the communities gathered around them.

Overall, the aim of this article has been to contribute to a better understanding of the ritual use of Christian relics in the Middle Ages and, more broadly, of the relationship between material culture, religious beliefs, ritual practices, and social narratives in premodern societies. I think it also shows the value of a comparative perspective that moves beyond the

[72] Marianne VEDELER, *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages*, Oslo, Nordic Open Access Scholarly Publishing, 2019, pp. 9-28; Martin RADERMACHER, "From 'Fetish' to 'Aura': The Charisma of Objects?," *Journal of religion in Europe*, 13, 2 (2019), pp. 166-190.
[73] VEDELER, *op. cit.*, p. 28; RADERMACHER, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

traditional boundaries of Byzantine and medieval studies to consider the different societies of the medieval Euro-Mediterranean world. Finally, I hope this article may help open new comparative avenues for the study of sacred objects beyond the Christian Mediterranean, including Eastern Europe, the Islamic world, and more distant settings such as Central Asian Buddhism—with its own distinctive cult of relics—as well as India, China and other regions.