

CHAPTER 2

Christianness and Material Culture, 250–400 CE¹

Éric Rebillard
Cornell University

Abstract

This chapter rejects the traditional approach of ‘Christian archaeology’ and its attempt at identifying a Christian material signature. Instead, it asks whether and how artefacts are used in everyday life to express religious identity. This approach is inspired by the work of Rogers Brubaker on ethnicity in the city of Cluj (Romania). A critical review of personal objects from Roman Britain bearing Christian symbols shows that it is difficult to find objects that would unequivocally attest to the belief of their owners. The identification of Christian burials in Roman Britain and elsewhere has also proven to be a vain project in the absence of an inscription mentioning the religious affiliation of the deceased. Thus, the use of a material signature as a prediction tool for determining the religion of individuals cannot but fail or result in circular reasoning. It is more relevant and rewarding to question the experiential salience of religious identity. A review of material evidence, or rather its absence, for Donatism in Roman Africa suggests that religious identity was not experientially salient in a context, such as the places of cult, where

How to cite this book chapter:

Rebillard, Éric. ‘Christianness and Material Culture, 250–400 CE’. In *Being Pagan, Being Christian in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, edited by Katja Ritari, Jan R. Stenger and William Van Andringa, 13–27. AHEAD: Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-4-2>. Copyright © Wiley 2015. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission from the copyright holder.

the specific affiliation was clear to all participants. In other contexts, such as the highly competitive context of Dura Europos, displaying religious affiliation was important, even within a specific place of cult. The conclusion is not only that a clearly demarcated Christian material culture is difficult to discern, but that this lack of distinction is to be expected, as there were very few contexts in which Christians in Late Antiquity would experience their religious identity as experientially salient enough to make a point of marking it.

Keywords: religious identity, religious material signature, Roman Britain, Roman Africa, Dura Europos

Introduction

Christian archaeology's primary goal – the identification of Christian artefacts or more generally of a Christian material signature – has been critiqued many times (see Bowes 2008 for a review of the field). This contribution seeks to go a step further. It builds on the approach developed by sociologist Rogers Brubaker in his study of ethnic groups in contemporary Eastern Europe.² Rather than questioning whether an artefact can be identified as Christian, Brubaker invites us to ask whether and how artefacts are used in everyday life to express religious identity. This new line of questioning will help in an understanding of how and when Christianness matters in the everyday life of Christians in Late Antiquity.

Intermittency and the Experience of Religious Identity

In a 2006 ethnographic monograph on the city of Cluj in western Romania, an area of mixed Hungarian and Romanian populations, Rogers Brubaker and his students compare the rhetorical basis of violence among ethnic groups and ethnicity as experienced in everyday life (Brubaker et al. 2006). Their goal is not to oppose 'elite' discourses to 'popular' practices but to balance the impression of a centrality of ethnicity in political discourse with the 'experiential centrality' (or not) of ethnicity in everyday life (Brubaker et al. 2006, 167). They are interested in what they call 'the intermittency of ethnicity', seeking how and when ethnicity is relevant, looking for 'sites where ethnicity might – but need not – be at work' (Brubaker et al. 2006, 168). As they warn,

‘in order to understand how ethnicity matters ... it is important to bear in mind how little it matters to much of everyday experience’ (206). However, they are very careful to point out that the fundamental intermittency and the episodic character of ethnicity must not be analysed as measures of its importance or even of its significance. What matters to them in the end is ‘the disjuncture between the thematization of ethnicity and nationhood in the political realm and their experience and enactment in everyday life’ (363).

The way they analyse the ‘Hungarian world’ in Cluj helps to clarify this last point (Brubaker et al. 2006, 265–300). What they call the ‘Hungarian world,’ nested within the wider Romanian world, is a group of institutions such as schools, churches and newspapers that help in producing and reproducing Hungarians. The separate state-run Hungarian school system, for example, is crucial for the transmission of the language and the culture. However, they show that taking Hungarian language education for granted does not imply direct ethnic socialisation: on the contrary, it possesses the power to render ethnicity invisible. Within the Hungarian world, one sends one’s children to a Hungarian school as ‘a matter of course, not a self-conscious choice’ (Brubaker et al. 2006, 297). Thanks to these institutions, ordinary Hungarians do not need to be committed to reproducing the Hungarian world. They conclude, in other words, ‘that much nominally interethnic interaction is not experientially interethnic’ (363).

Highlighting the disjuncture between the thematisation of ethnicity and its enactment in everyday life is of immediate relevance to the study of early Christianity. Because of the nature of the evidence – for the most part, texts written by the clergy – scholars have tended to frame their questions in Christian terms, and unsurprisingly they have come up with Christian answers. Material culture and archaeology can provide a body of evidence more closely related to the everyday experience of individuals than most texts do. In what follows, a few case studies illustrate how Brubaker’s approach allows us to propose a careful analysis of how and when Christianness matters in Late Antiquity.

Personal Objects

The first case study considers the use of personal objects as markers of identity by Christians. The working hypothesis in this case is that by wearing ornaments with Christian symbols Christians would display

their religious identity to the people, Christians or not, whom they encountered in their daily interactions.

For the pre-Constantinian period, literary evidence does not attest to the use of external markers by Christians to display their religious allegiance (Rebillard 2012, 13–14). No pagan author attacks Christians for displaying their religion with symbols or signs on personal objects that they could wear (Benko 1980). When Tertullian mentions a gesture that could identify Christians to outsiders – making the sign of the cross on the forehead – he lists all sorts of contexts in which this can happen (Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3.4) but does not allude to any personal object with a Christian symbol.

The fear of being recognised as a Christian in this period has often been invoked as an explanation for this lack of external markers. Though most historians now agree that persecutions had a low impact on the everyday life of Christians (Rebillard 2012, 42), an argument based on the absence of objects is as difficult as any argument from silence. How different is the situation when we turn to the post-Constantinian period, for which we have objects bearing Christian symbols?

In her catalogue of small finds that have been considered as evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain, Frances Mawer accepts as Christian only 70 out of a total of 260 objects (Mawer 1995, 136; see table 5(a)).³ Objects that are classified as personal ornaments – including belt fittings (buckles, buckle plates and strap ends), rings and gemstones, brooches, and pins – represent the highest percentage of her accepted objects. A closer look at some of these objects, however, shows that additional caution might be required.

Mawer catalogues 16 belt fittings, most of which are decorated with peacocks or the tree of life and accepts all of them as objects that attest to the Christian allegiance of their owners (Mawer 1995, 59–65). She seems to exclude the possibility that the belts could be of official military issue, as has been considered, but she leaves the door open for a civil service issue. She points out, moreover, that the symbols of the peacock and tree of life are not otherwise used as ‘imperial’ symbols (Mawer 1995, 60). Indeed, as we will see, a lot of objects claimed to be Christian could be considered imperial rather than religious. In the present case, since many belts of this type do not bear symbols or images that can be considered as Christian, the choice of the peacock or of the tree of life is likely intended to denote Christian identity (see also Petts 2003, 112–13). However, given that we do not know their

exact system of production and distribution, we can accept that such belt fittings say something about the allegiance of their commissioner, but we should be wary of assuming that they necessarily say something about that of the individuals who wore them. This first case shows how difficult it is to find objects that would unequivocally attest to the belief of their owners.

When it comes to rings and gemstones, Mawer rejects 19 of the 45 claimed to be Christian and accepts 11 as Christian, to which she adds another 11 as possibly Christian (Mawer 1995, 136, table 5(a)). Many of the rings, however, may be signs not of religious but of imperial allegiance, or they may otherwise have an official function. Indeed, the Chi-Rho symbol, for instance, quickly became part of the imperial imagery and a number of these seal rings, especially when they bear no sign of customisation, could have belonged to government officials. As David Petts writes: ‘The use of the *chi-rho* on many objects in Britain may tell us as much about the use of imperial imagery as religious symbolism’ (2003, 108). He gives the example of nine pewter ingots that bear the name of one Syagrius and either a simple Chi-Rho or a Chi-Rho with the phrase *spes in Deo* (Petts 2003, 108–09). Both Petts and Mawer point out that the symbols and phrases may just indicate that these ingots were produced under imperial control. Thus, they are inclined to abstain from any conclusion about the religious allegiance of Syagrius on the sole basis of the ingots (Petts 2003, 109; Mawer 1995, 96–97).

Not all examples of objects with Christian symbols and phrases are so clear-cut and belong unequivocally to the category of objects with an official function. However, this is an important warning that the presence of a Christian symbol on an object does not make it a marker of Christian identity and that, even when it is an attestation of the faith of its owner, it is not necessarily an affirmation of religious identity. Seal rings with a Chi-Rho, for instance, could belong to members of the clergy and thus display the function rather than the religious identity of their owners.

Very few of the objects in the category of personal ornament were, therefore, used by Christians to display their religious allegiance, even less their religious identity, and this in the post-Constantinian period. Thus, we should be wary, when we do not find such objects for the pre-Constantinian period, of deducing anything about Christians’ motivations for not displaying their religious identity on personal objects.

This first discussion also invites us not to take for granted that Christians sought to display their religious identity on personal objects and, therefore, in their everyday interactions with other people.

Burial and Religious Identity

The second case study is that of death and burial. Given the importance attached to death and the afterlife in Christian teachings, it is often assumed that Christians would want to identify themselves as Christian in death and burial (see Volp 2002). Thus, many scholars focus on places of burial that they pre-emptively define as exclusively Christian. This has been, for instance, the traditional approach to the Roman catacombs.⁴

Another example of such an approach is Ann Marie Yasin's study of early Christian commemorative practices (Yasin 2009). She tries to establish that a dramatic change occurred in the ways Christians bury and commemorate their dead, describing it as a shift from household monuments, or family tombs, to collective burial within churches. However, burials that conform to this new model are only a tiny minority of all burials of Christians. As Yasin herself is well aware, most tombs within churches belong to members of the clergy and to a few privileged individuals. Although little archaeological evidence is available for the tombs of 'ordinary' Christians, there is no doubt that most Christians continued to bury and commemorate their dead in 'household monuments'. The argument is strikingly circular. It focuses on places selected for their religious associations and then it draws conclusions about their role in defining religious identity.

Identifying Christian Cemeteries in Roman Britain

Since it is typically difficult to identify Christian burials in the absence of an inscription or explicit representation that affirms the religious affiliation of the deceased, another strategy followed by scholars is to define a set of criteria for the identification of a Christian burial.

Because continuity of Christian tradition is lacking in Great Britain between the Roman and the post-Roman periods, unusual sophistication has been deployed there to identify Christian cemeteries from the Roman period. There are two sides to the issue of the identification of Christian cemeteries. Charles Thomas adopts a rather cautious

approach and maps only two Christian cemeteries (Thomas 1981). Similarly, Robert Philpott dismisses the possibility of distinguishing between pagan and Christian burials (Philpott 1991). On the other side, Dorothy Watts proposes a list of 13 Christian cemeteries (Watts 1991).⁵ In addition to the presence of neonatal burials, which she considers ‘a reliable guide to the identification of Christian cemeteries’ (Watts 1991, 51), she ranks the traditional criteria (orientation, supine and extended position, absence of grave goods, etc.) and applies them to about 30 cemeteries (79, figure 1).

There are many problems with such an approach.⁶ The most obvious is that several criteria are weighted based on the teachings of Christ and the early Church. For instance, Watts concludes from a handful of texts supposedly reflecting Christ’s care for the young that ‘it can, therefore, readily be accepted that Christian concern for the living infant ... would extend, at death, to the careful interment of his body’ (Watts 1991, 49). There is no need to discuss at length the weakness of such an assumption. It supposes some straightforward and direct link between the sayings of Jesus, the teachings of the early Church and the behaviour of Christians.

Even Watts’ appraisal of the presence of two concurrent patterns of burial practices in the same locality is tainted by the assumption that there was ‘a tradition of separate Christian cemeteries’ (Watts 1991, 64). This tradition is not as well established as was once thought (Rebillard 2003, 2009). In any case, the criterion is applicable to only four sites in Great Britain, and there is no archaeological evidence that the adoption of a different burial pattern is due to a different religious affiliation.

More generally, any attempt to identify the signature of a religion in material culture presupposes that it can then be used as a prediction tool. It means that traits that have been identified as characteristic of a few members of a group are deemed to be valid indicators for the identification of other members of the same group in a different context. This is an obvious case of the tendency to ‘groupism’ denounced by Rogers Brubaker about approaches that see ethnic or religious groups ‘as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed’ (Brubaker 2004, 8). It also leads to ‘conceptualiz[ing] individuals’ religions as little versions of some institutional model,’ instead of making room for what Meredith B. McGuire calls ‘lived religion’ (McGuire 2008, 185).

Changes in Commemorative Practices in North Africa

The main issue, however, is the assumption that religious identity is salient when it comes to choosing a place of burial. The next case study shows that few individuals identify themselves by their religious affiliation in the context of their burial, and that even when they do so, they share the rituals of the neighbouring tombs whether or not these belong to co-religionists. Looking at material installations for the cult of the dead in North Africa, I found evidence that between the 2nd and the 5th century, material installations for the sacrifice to the dead disappeared, to be replaced by installations for the banquet of the living.

In a necropolis located to the west of the ancient city of Tipasa (Algeria), some areas have been in use continuously from the 2nd to the 5th century and thus provide us with a rare situation in which we can see a change in the material installations for the cult of the dead (Bouchenaki 1975). I focus on ensemble II and its five enclosures. The earliest enclosure (area 2) comprised some 30 cupula tombs of the common North African type (see Stirling 2007), generally equipped with an offering table and, in most cases, a libation conduit. These tombs have been dated to the 2nd and early 3rd centuries (Bouchenaki 1975, 80–95). Unfortunately, the area around the tombs and the surface of the offering tables are not documented in the publication, but we can probably assume that the tables were used to burn offerings to the dead.⁷ A masonry base (80 × 80 cm) built between tombs 4 and 5 has been interpreted as an intermediary type between the offering table attached to the tomb and the 4th and 5th-century mensa tomb that I describe next (Bouchenaki 1975, 84, 95). Accordingly, the table could have been used for offerings to the dead, but also for the banquet of the living, the guests being seated on the cupula tombs that are around it. However, the structure is too badly preserved and too poorly documented for any conclusive interpretation.

In area 3, we find both the cupula tombs and the so-called mensa tombs. A very common type of mensa tomb is represented by tomb 2 (Bouchenaki 1975, 105–06). On top of the tomb itself is a rectangular masonry base of 3.13 × 2.50 m, with a semi-circular depression in the centre of one side. The mensa tomb therefore comprised both the reclining couches and the table itself. More impressive is the installation associated with tomb 11 (113–18). The monument occupies some 65 square metres. A U-shaped masonry base of 6.6 × 6 m with a rec-

tangular depression on the east side opens up on a rectangular room (5.5 × 3.4 m); along its northern side there is a bench and there is a well on the southern side. The mensa is 80 cm high.

Even if absolute dating is not available, the mensa tombs are clearly more recent than the cupula tombs of the enclosure (Bouchenaki 1975, 119). There are many more mensa tombs in the necropolis, all dated to the 4th and 5th centuries (170–71). While in area 1 of ensemble I there is a Christian mensa (40–45), there is no evidence that the mensae in other areas are Christian as well.

The change evinced at Tipasa in the western necropolis from offering tables to dinner tables cannot be confirmed directly at any other site. On the other hand, no archaeological data invalidates the hypothesis of a more general shift (see Rebillard 2015b for a review of evidence). Moreover, there is some indirect evidence that such a shift took place. First, Lea Stirling has firmly established that the cupula tomb disappeared after the 3rd century (Stirling 2007). The cupula tomb flourished during the 2nd and 3rd centuries as its shape was particularly well suited to marking and covering bodies laid out either for cremation in situ or for burial. There are some later examples, but they are much rarer. Second, the use of the term *mensa* on epitaphs to designate the tomb itself dates to the end of the 3rd century in Mauretania, where Paul-Albert Février was able to study a series of well-dated inscriptions (Février 1964). Finally, there is an undeniable multiplication of mensae in later, Christian contexts in Africa and elsewhere in the Mediterranean world (Duval 1995, 199–200).

It is important to realise that the shift of emphasis from a sacrifice to the dead to the meal of the living is not limited to Christian evidence. It is not an index of the Christianisation of the traditional commemoration ritual. Therefore, it begs the question of a change in ritual that is not the result of religious change and shows that these rituals for commemorating the dead are shared by neighbours independent of their religious affiliation.

The Experiential Salience of Religious Identity

The last case study – material evidence, or rather its absence, for Donatism in North Africa – will allow us to test the notion of the experiential salience of religious identity. The conflict between the two competing churches in 4th- and 5th-century North Africa, the Cae-

cilianists, also known as Catholics, and the Donatists, is well known (Miles 2016; Shaw 2011). In order to map the distribution of the two churches, scholars have tried to determine criteria that would allow the identification of their respective buildings. Thus, Frend compares the locations of bishoprics attested at the Conference of 411 with the results of excavations. He depends heavily on André Berthier's archaeological investigations in central Numidia (Berthier 1943; Frend 1952). Frend accepts without much discussion Berthier's conclusions on the Donatist character of most of the excavated churches, whether based on the presence of *Deo Laudes* in related inscriptions or on that of installations for the cult of martyrs and relics. The weaknesses of these conclusions have been pointed out many times and there is no point in ridiculing the confidence of Berthier in 1943 and Frend in 1952 in their ability to identify Donatist basilicas in Numidia, the traditional stronghold of the Donatists.

A survey by Anne Michel (2005) lists 22 churches of the ecclesiastical province of Numidia that can be securely dated to the time of Augustine, and only two of them are *possibly* Donatist. The first is located at Ksar el Kelb (Vegesala; BAtlas⁸ 34 F2). At the end of the south aisle of the church there is a mensa with an inscription that reads: *Memo-ria domni Marchuli*. The identification of Marculus with the Donatist martyr who was executed in 347 is debated and in any case unverifiable (Gui et al. 1992, 291–94; Michel 2005, 104). The second is one of the 11 churches excavated at Thamugadi (Timgad; BAtlas 34 E2). Evidence for the identification of the basilica as the 'Donatist Cathedral' comes from an adjacent house where an inscription with the mention of a *sacerdos Dei Optatus* was found (Gui et al. 1992, 274–78). Some scholars want to recognise in this Optatus the famous Donatist bishop. Optatus, however, is a common name in North Africa and *sacerdos* can also be used of presbyters (Gui et al. 1992, 275–76; Michel 2005, 104).

The identification of these churches as Donatist rests, therefore, on very fragile foundations, especially as there is no archaeological evidence that would allow us to distinguish these churches from Catholic ones. According to Anne Michel, the layout of the basilicas, the liturgical settings (when documented) and even the installations for the cult of the martyrs do not present any significant difference that would allow the identification of the religious affiliation of the Christians using the different Numidian basilicas (Michel 2005, 103).

Thus, Catholics and Donatists did not use a material signature to distinguish themselves from each other. It should be noted that if basilicas, artefacts and inscriptions cannot be divided between Catholic and Donatist Christians, the issue is clearly not the amount of preserved or excavated evidence. The debate between Catholics and Donatists is mainly about issues of ecclesiastical authority and legitimacy. Indeed, we do not hear about any difference in the celebration of the cult that would generate distinctive liturgical settings. Bishops on both sides, however, constantly reminded their flocks of the importance of the sharp difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Shaw 2011). Brubaker has shown that within institutions which produce and reproduce Hungarians, such as schools or churches, Hungarianness is less salient and visible. The absence of markers of identity in Donatist churches, or Catholic churches for that matter, could, then, suggest that religious identity was less experientially salient in a context where the specific affiliation was clear to all.

A counter-example, however, shows that this is not necessarily the case. When the famous house from Dura Europos, known as the first *domus ecclesiae*, was remodelled in the mid-third century to accommodate a meeting hall, it was adorned at the same time with an explicitly Christian iconography. Jás Elsner has pointed out that the Christian house should not be studied in isolation and that its iconography should be compared with those of the contemporary mithraeum and synagogue (Elsner 2001). Indeed, the three cultic places each developed a programme of initiate mythology that explicitly denigrated the other cults. Moreover, as Kim Bowes has emphasised, the three buildings are all on one street, and thus they reflect socio-religious competition in this garrison town (Bowes 2008, 582). In the case of Dura, therefore, the competition between cults produced a context in which even within a specific place of cult it was important to display one’s religious affiliation.

Thus, the experiential salience of religious identity varies from one context to another and can help us better understand the context itself. We may wonder regarding the divide between Catholics and Donatists whether the experience of it in everyday life was as marked as the discourse of ecclesiastical authorities makes it, and if these same ecclesiastical authorities did not feel the need to display it within meeting places.

Conclusion

Not only is a clearly demarcated Christian material culture difficult to discern, but the case studies presented here suggest that this lack of distinction is to be expected, as there were very few contexts in which Christians in Late Antiquity would experience their religious identity as experientially salient enough to make a point of marking it. Examples from North Africa show that this is true in contexts in which Christians interact with non-Christians as well as in contexts in which they interact with Christians belonging to different affiliations. This means not that religious identity did not matter – there is plenty evidence to the contrary – but that it was not salient, i.e., experienced, in every context. Being Christian, therefore, is only intermittently relevant to the social experience of Christians. Material culture shows this better than most written evidence, which usually originates with bishops who are eager to enforce a much more hierarchical arrangement of identity sets in which the entirety of an individual's behaviour is determined and interpreted in terms of their religious affiliation.⁹

Notes

- 1 This chapter was submitted in November 2017 and builds on the author's earlier work. Copyright © Wiley 2015: 'Material Culture and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity' by Éric Rebillard. In *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, edited by Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke, 425–36. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Reproduced by permission of Wiley.
- 2 I present Brubaker's approach and its relevance more fully in Rebillard (2012).
- 3 In addition, she considers 60 objects as possibly Christian (136; table 5(a)).
- 4 On the historiography of the catacombs and the assumption of separate Christian burial, see Rebillard (2016).
- 5 See Quensel-von-Kalben (2000) for a more sophisticated statistical model using the same set of criteria; there is no new argument or evidence in Sparey-Green (2003).
- 6 See Millett (1995) for an appraisal of a prior attempt by Watts (in Crummy, Crummy and Crossan 1993, 192–202) to establish a set of criteria.
- 7 See Ben Abed-Griesheimer (2004) for similar tombs with offering tables: the surface was burned, and ashes and charcoal have been found in the ground around them; more generally, Stirling (2004).
- 8 BATlas = Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World.
- 9 See Handelman (1977, 192–93) on lateral and hierarchical arrangements and Rebillard (2012, 4–5) on how the distinction can be used for Late Antiquity.

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