

From Living to Visual Images. Paradigms of Corporeal Iconicity in Late Antiquity

Introduction

Michele Bacci and Vladimir Ivanovici (eds.)

Abstract

By exploring the various traditions of iconic living present in the Roman world in the period preceding the affirmation of the icon, the contributions in this thematic issue recreate part of the context in which the concept of icon was formed, and invite readers to add a new perspective on the phenomenon: that of surrogate for the living iconic body.

Iconicity, again

[1] As the reader will quickly discover, it is not artefacts but bodies that form the subject of the contributions in this thematic issue.¹ Furthermore, while the iconic dimension of corpses (on their own or together with their material settings), has often been made the focus of art historical studies, this volume proposes the living rather than the dead body qua artefact. Arguing for an iconic dimension of the living body as cross-cultural and cross-historical phenomenon, the editors open the discussion on how this potentiality of the body influenced the concept and perception of the late antique icon.² As visual medium reproducing (at least conventionally) an individual's features, the icon is intrinsically related to the person's body. As such, scholars often

¹ This special issue draws on the international conference "The Spectacle of the Flesh. Iconic Living Bodies in Late Antiquity and Beyond", organised by Michele Bacci, Vladimir Ivanovici and Tanja Michalsky, and co-hosted by the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institute for Art History, Rome and the Swiss Institute in Rome, 30–31 May 2016.

² We use "icon" in the modern sense of the term which infers the object's mediatory and animated functions. These functions seem to have become widely accepted in the course of the sixth century, with earlier portraits of Jesus and the saints bearing only part of what in the sixth century became the connotations of the icon. On these earlier images, see Katherine Marsengill, "Panel Paintings and Early Christian Icons", in: *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, eds. Mark Ellison and Robin M. Jensen, Abingdon 2018, 191-206: 202-204. The bibliography on icons is too large to reproduce here. Apart from the titles referenced in the text, a selection includes Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), 94-100; Averil Cameron, "The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation", in: *The Church and the Arts*, ed. Diana Wood, Oxford 1992, 1-42; Robin Cormack, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds*, London 1997; Leslie Brubaker, "Icons Before Iconoclasm?", in: *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto Medioevo*, Spoleto 1998 (= *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, 45), vol. 2, 1215-1254; Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, Philadelphia 2010; Jaś Elsner, "Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium", in: *The Art Bulletin* 94 (2012), no. 3, 368-394.

contrasted the living model with its representation, and interpreted features such as hieratism, the reduction of individuality, and luminosity as visual formulas used to indicate sanctity. In this, they built on their own, modern assumptions of what the person's body looked like. Contrastingly, we argue that portraits need to be analysed in relation to how the bodies they represented were perceived. For Late Antiquity, hagiographic texts indicate that the features held to denote sanctity in icons characterised the living bodies of holy individuals.³ While the icon's medium, the iconographic formulas, and the aesthetic of light each carried a range of connotations which enmeshed the Christian portrait in a complex symbolic web, it appears that the desire to preserve or multiply the effect of the living saint's body was essential to the icon's creation. The contributors responded to the editors' invitation to trace the various ways in which the living bodies of those who eventually became the subject of icons were thought to be iconic, that is *visually manifest the sacred either by becoming screens on which it was displayed, or by revealing it through their transfigured corporeality*. Although overused, the term "iconicity" best synthesises the phenomenon because it pays attention to the body's relationship with the icon and it encompasses the various ways in which this privileged relationship with the divine is manifested.⁴

Corporeal iconicity as transcultural phenomenon

[2] The perception of some privileged bodies as sites of supernatural energy is a phenomenon encountered in different historical and geographic contexts. In the Middle Ages and beyond, efforts were made to associate this quality with the secular clergy, starting from the Pope: it was assumed that priests, inasmuch they acted as mediators between God and humanity during the performance of the Eucharistic miracle, came to be invested with such a privileged status, that it proved to be blasphemous and even dangerous to glance at their faces when they elevated the holy

³ Our main sources are the anonymous *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (late 4th century), Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* (419-420), and Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *Historia Religiosa* (ca. 450). See Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Ascetism and 'The Body from Nowhere'", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994), 137-153; id., *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*, Philadelphia 2009; Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2000 (= *Transformations of Classical Heritage*, 30). See also James A. Francis, "Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representation from the Second to Fourth Centuries, C.E.", in: *American Journal of Philology* 124 (2003), no. 4, 575-600; id., "Living Icons: The Metaphor of Imaging from the Second to Fourth Centuries, C.E.", in: *Studia Patristica* 40 (2006), 209-214; Laura Nasrallah, "The Earthen Human, the Breathing Statue: The Sculptor God, Greco-Roman Statuary, and Clement of Alexandria", in: *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise [Genesis 2-3] and its Reception History*, eds. Konrad Schmid and Christoph Riedweg, Tübingen 2008, 110-140; Michele Bacci, *The Many Faces of Christ. Portraying the Holy in the East and West 300 to 1300*, London 2014, 69-83.

⁴ Bissera Pentcheva introduced the notion of corporeal iconicity but gave it a different development. Following the Church Fathers' intellectualising reading of the image of God in humankind as a strictly non-visual phenomenon, her iconic individuals are "nonrepresentational", that is performative images of God with no visual relevance. Touched upon in her earlier studies, the concept is more thoroughly developed in her *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium*, University Park 2017.

host.⁵ Yet, much more widespread was the feeling that access to the divine could be provided by eye-inspection of non-secular church people, such as monks, whose distinctive looks and clothes reminded viewers of their neglect of worldly things, and especially hermits, whose radical lifestyle and behaviour was more or less consciously perceived as a material reflection of God's supernatural, meta-human otherness.⁶

[3] Unlike monks, whose bodies display conventional signs, like tonsured or thoroughly shaved heads hinting at their renunciation of the world, anchorites stood out due to their adoption of looks that seem to deliberately defy any form of social or cultural convention. The body was used as a material and visual indicator of their marginality, which, in turn, was perceived as a metaphor of their liminal status as thresholds between the human and divine dimensions. The early Christian texts studied by Patricia Cox Miller and Georgia Frank describe ancient pilgrims climbing mountains and crossing deserts to enjoy the privileged view of the holy fathers enshrined in caves, cells, mountain peaks, and columns, whose admittedly repellent appearance could be taken as evidence—on account of its perception as a "reversed beauty"—for its closeness to the spiritual bodies of angels, saints, and biblical figures.⁷ These same texts indicate that the body could sometimes be used instrumentally to convey sanctity, even if the body's owner was not exactly a behavioural model: writers repeated that it was not sufficient to wear long hair and beards, or to walk naked, in order to become a holy man.

[4] A clochard-like behaviour and appearance—partly inherited from and shared with late antique philosophers, Jewish lifelong Nazirites, and Indian sadhus—was one of the basic characteristics of hermits throughout their history, which was a long one notwithstanding the manifested aversion of many churchmen, both secular and regular.⁸ Ethiopia is the only Christian country where something analogous to the eye-inspection of Desert Fathers described by Palladius and other late antique authors can be practiced still nowadays: the so-called *baḥtawiyan*, literally "loners", are actually not as lonely as one might imagine. Many pilgrims come to glance at them praying in their perfect, yet permeable solitude. They construct their image in a rather careful

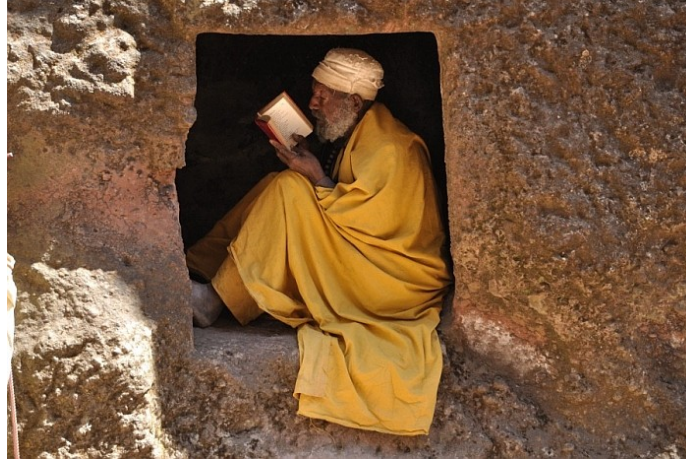
⁵ What Peter Brown, in *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, Princeton and Oxford 2012, p. 517 called "the 'othering' of the clergy" began in Late Antiquity. For a synthetic overview of the process, see Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany: Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400-ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016 (= *Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 6), 190-212; id., *Chosen Vessels: Embodying the Divine in Late Antiquity*, forthcoming. On the shifting perceptions of the Pope's body in the Middle Ages, see Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *Il corpo del Papa*, Turin 1994.

⁶ E.g. Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*.

⁷ Miller, "Desert Ascetism"; id., *The Corporeal Imagination*; Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*.

⁸ See the critical remarks by the Egyptian anchorite apa Apollo, who observed that the adoption of an ostentatiously unconventional look was a way of seeking merit in the world: *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* 8.59 (ed. André-Jean Festugière, Brussels 1961 (= *Subsidia Hagiographica*, 34), 70). On the clergy's rejection of a poor look and adoption of an aristocratic one for itself in Late Antiquity, see Bernhard Jussen, "Liturgy and Legitimation, or How the Gallo-Romans Ended the Roman Empire", in: *Ordering Medieval Society*, ed. Bernhard Jussen, Philadelphia 2001, 147-199.

way, by wearing matted hair (said to imitate that of ancient Nazirites) and by inscribing their bodies into elements of the natural landscape, such as very narrow caves that open onto steep slopes (Fig. 1). Indeed, it is as if grottoes worked as framing devices enabling viewers to locate and identify their objects of contemplation.⁹



1 Bahitawi monk, Lalibela, Ethiopia (photograph provided by www.travel-tour-guide.com/)

[5] The case of India may help us to get a more vivid idea of how emotionally charged the visual experience of the hermits' sanctified bodies could be. In Jain *digambara* tradition the holy men's alterity is manifested by their being naked (*digambara* means "covered with air"). Pilgrims pay homage to their bodies, whose nudity works as a visual hint at the naked appearance of the most important Jain tirthankaras, the wise men who attained illumination and therefore established a fordable passage across the sea of continuous births and deaths, the *samsara*.¹⁰ Similarly, the look adopted by those Hindu sadhus who devote themselves to the perpetual worship of Shiva is deliberately meant to reproduce that displayed in the God's standard images: they wear matted hair, sit on the ground in the lotus position, cover their body with white powder, and hold the trident, Shiva's most distinctive iconographic attribute.¹¹

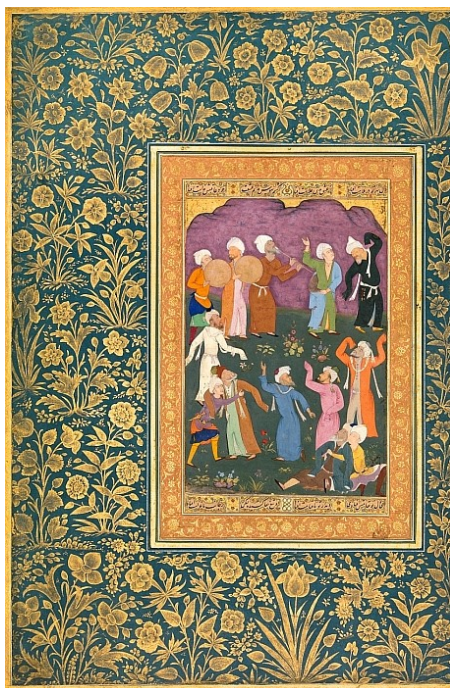
[6] There are religious traditions which, instead of describing the iconic qualities of holy people's bodies, lay emphasis on their performativity. The *sama* ceremony invented by the famous *sufi* mystic Celaledin Rumī Mevlanā (1207–1273 CE) is

⁹ Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Abeba 1970, 23; Getatchew Haile, "Ethiopia", in: *Encyclopaedia of Monasticism*, eds. William M. Johnston and Christopher Kleinhenz, London and New York 2000, vol. 1, 458-459. See Marsengill, "Panel Paintings" for a similar type of staging in Byzantine Cyprus.

¹⁰ M. Whitney Kelting, "Jain Traditions: Practicing Tradition Today", in: *South Asian Religions: Tradition and Today*, eds. Karen Pechilis and Selva J. Raj, London and New York 2013, 73-100, esp. 82.

¹¹ Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*, Chicago 1981; Patrick Olivelle, "Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions", in: *Hair. Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, eds. Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara D. Mille, New York 1998, 11-49; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva*, Oxford 1973.

probably the best-known example.¹² The mystical trip of the soul toward its creator was staged and enacted by the dance of whirling dervishes, whose continuous, rotating movements were intended to be viewed as metaphor of the sufi holy men's contemplative access to God (Fig. 2).



2 "Dancing Dervishes", folio from the Shah Jahan Album, 38.6 cm x 25.9 cm, by Mir 'Ali Haravi (d. ca. 1550), India. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, acc. no. 55.121.10.18 (public domain)

[7] Indeed, even in this context, bodies were described as thresholds to the supernatural dimension, albeit in different terms. According to Mevlana's biographer, the Persian author Šams al-Dīn Aflākī writing in 1318-1319, the unique God's uncircumscribability and invisibility were paradoxically visualised in the sufi master's outward appearance: his eyes were so radiant that nobody could stare at them, and when a Greek painter was once asked to paint a portrait of him he was forced to renounce the commission, as Mevlana's face continuously changed its appearance.¹³ What is more important, the principle that holy men's bodies were reflections of God's omnipotence lead to the conclusion that all of them could take up the same and identical appearance, irrespective of the religious tradition they belonged to. Aflākī records that Mevlana himself invited some of his followers to contemplate a Byzantine

¹² Talat Halman and Metin And, eds., *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes*, Istanbul 1983.

¹³ Šems-ed-Dīn Aflākī, *Manāqib ul-‘arīfīn* (French trans. by Clément Huart, *Les saints des derviches tourneurs*, Paris 1918-1922, vol. 2, 275-276); cf. Michele Bacci, "Artisti eretici ed eterodossi a Bisanzio", in: *L'artista a Bisanzio e nel mondo cristiano-orientale*, ed. Michele Bacci, Pisa 2007, 177-209, esp. 204-206, and Antony Eastmond, "Un'eco della leggenda del Mandylion nell'Islam", in: *Intorno al Sacro Volto. Genova, Bisanzio e il Mediterraneo (secoli XI-XIV)*, eds. Anna Rosa Calderoni Masetti, Colette Dufour Bozzo and Gerhard Wolf, Venice 2007, 175-180.

monk in a Greek village and a mendicant hermit living on a street corner in a Frankish town of Palestine: both looked to their viewers as if they had the same face as Rūmī.¹⁴

[8] This cross-cultural efficacy of the holy men's bodies, sanctified and altered by their contemplation and mystical access to the divine, is indicative, in some way, of their extraordinary appeal. As they come close to the supernatural dimension, they become invested with a transformative power, which happens to overcome the limits of individual, corporeal appearance. This idea has lingered until today and can be illustrated by a curious story related by one of Sathya Sai Baba's (1926–2011 CE) biographies, according to which when an English couple asked the Indian guru to take a picture of him, the photographic film was imprinted with an image not of him, but of Jesus of Nazareth, clearly modelled on the type diffused by thousands of popular prints.¹⁵ The sanctified matter of a saint's body, whether living or dead, belongs to a dimension where all individual distinctions are, in this story, cancelled.

Corporeal iconicity and the icon in Late Antiquity

[9] The desire to see the Christian ascetics' emaciated bodies—either as proof of a higher power at work within them, or in hope of seeing the divine manifested on them in the form of light—catalysed an impressive pilgrimage movement to ascetics in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in the late fourth and fifth century CE.¹⁶ Similar revelatory effects were ascribed to others beginning with the first century CE, with iconicity being a commonly recognised potentiality of the body. Roman emperors, initiates of the various eastern cults that from the second century onwards gained adepts across the Empire, and heads of philosophical schools alike were credited with a revelatory function that manifested often in the same manner, as a statuesque immobility and radiance.¹⁷ Writing in the second century to rebut the Christian movement, the pagan philosopher Celsus took the time to state the obvious: had Jesus had a special relationship with the divine, it would have manifested on his body.¹⁸ Celsus thus testifies to the notion of individual holiness becoming recognised in Roman society, and to corporeal iconicity as its mark. The *divine men*, an artificial category created in modern scholarship to draw attention to the phenomenon and allow the analysis of its very diverse representatives, had as common feature a privileged relationship with the divine.¹⁹ The Christian concept of icon appears related to this phenomenon. Unlike the

¹⁴ Aflākī (trans. Huart, *Les saints des derviches tourneurs*, 78-79 and 105-107).

¹⁵ Shripad Dattatraya Kulkarni, *Shri Satya Sai, the Yugavatara: Scientific Analysis of Baba Phenomenon*, Mumbai 1990, 134.

¹⁶ E.g. Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*.

¹⁷ For emperors, see e.g. Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *Epitoma rei militaris* 2.5 (ed. Alf Önnfors, Stuttgart and Leipzig 1995, 61). For initiates, see e.g. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.24 (ed. Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)*, Leiden 1975, 100). For philosophers, see e.g. Marinus of Samaria, *Vita Procli* 23 (ed. Jean François Boissonade, *Marini Vita Procli*, Leipzig 1814, 19). See Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*; Ivanovici, *Chosen Vessels*.

¹⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.76-77 (ed. Migne, *PG* 11.1413CD).

¹⁹ The *theios aner* concept was introduced by Ludwig Bieler, *Theios Aner. Das Bild des göttlichen Menschen in Spätantike und Frühchristentum*, 2 vols., Vienna, 1935-1936 and has

portraits of ancestors and of exemplary figures that Romans traditionally hung in their homes, of those of deceased relatives hung in family tombs or affixed to mummies,²⁰ or of images of the gods,²¹ the Christian icon represented divinised humans.²² Beginning in the first century CE, these emerged from all kinds of contexts and closed the chasm that had separated humankind from the divine sphere. For the first time since the age of mythic heroes, a new group of humans joined the gods. Along with the portraits of figures such as Plato, Pythagoras or Moses, held now to have lived according to the new standard of holy life, the images of living holy individuals made their way into the homes' *lararia* where they joined the images of the gods.²³

[10] The icon thus appears as the Christian expression of a fashion of creating images of consecrated individuals. Close to imperial images as both sought to multiply the presence of a human deemed to have a particular relationship with the divine, the icon went beyond that and other models of animated artefacts.²⁴ It was, we believe, the very models it drew on that allowed the icon to transcend them. Building on the substantiating power of animated images of the gods and of imperial portraits, on the

since been under debate. The review article by Jaap-Jan Flinterman's, "The Ubiquitous 'Divine Man'", in: *Numen* 43 (1996), no. 1, 82-98 synthesises the problems posed by the concept. We define divine men with Paul Herczeg, "Theios Aner Traits in the Apocryphal Acts of Peter", in: *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism*, ed. Jan M. Bremmer, Leuven 1998, 29-38: 32 as charismatic individuals who inspired a sort of religious devotion in their followers and whose effect was theophanic. On the diversity of the divine men, see Graham Anderson, *Sage, Saint and Sophist*, London and New York, 1994.

²⁰ Following Gilbert Dagron, "L'image de culte et le portrait", in: *Byzance et les images*, eds. André Guillou and Jannic Durand, Paris 1994, 121-150; Katherine Marsegill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art*, Turnhout 2013 argued for icons having their origin in the Graeco-Roman portraiture tradition which produced panel images for both domestic and funerary settings.

²¹ Jaś Elsner, "The Origins of the Icon: Pilgrimage, Religion and Visual Culture in the Roman East as 'Resistance' to the Centre", in: *The Early Roman Empire in the East*, ed. Susan E. Alcock, Oxford 1997, 178-199 and Thomas F. Mathews and Norman E. Muller, *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons*, Los Angeles 2016 located the origin of the icon in the cultic art of eastern cults and painted panels of the gods, respectively.

²² The modern, post-Christian notion of divinity has an absolute ring to it that lacked in the Roman world. See Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford 2002; Norman Russel, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford 2004.

²³ *Historia Augusta*, *Marc. Aurel.* 3.5 and *Sev. Alex.* 29.2-3 (ed. David Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Cambridge, Mass. 1922 and 1924 (= *Loeb Classical Library*, 139 & 140), vol. 1, 138 and vol. 2, 234). See Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Hist. Rel.* 26.11 (eds. Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen, *Histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. 2: *Histoire Philothée XIV-XXX. Traité sur la charité (XXXI)*, Paris 1979 (= *Sources Chrétiennes*, 257), 182) on representations of Simeon the Stylite (390-459) being displayed at the entrance of shops in Rome already ca. 450, while he was still alive.

²⁴ On imperial images as icons, see Antony Eastmond, "Between Icon and Idol: The Uncertainty of Imperial Images", in: *Icon and Word: the Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, ed. Antony Eastmond and Liz James, Aldershot 2003, 73-85; Maria Cristina Carile, "Imperial Icons in Late Antiquity and Byzantium: The Iconic Image of the Emperor Between Representation and Presence", in: *Ikon* 9 (2016), 75-98.

portraits' mnemonic and exemplary function, and on the commonsensical character of using images in worship practices, the icon managed to (re)produce the divine presence. The presence that the icon fleshed out manifested in the form established by *living* iconic individuals: a combination of immobility, luminosity, and progression towards an impersonal physiognomy that stood for the divine image in which humanity had been made.

[11] By exploring the various traditions of iconic living present in the Roman world in the period preceding the affirmation of the icon, the contributions in this thematic issue recreate part of the context in which the concept of icon was formed and invite readers to add a new perspective on the phenomenon, complementary to those recognized to have influenced the icon: that of surrogate for the living iconic body.²⁵

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²⁵ Relics seem to have gone through an analogous process, with them addressed as the living body of the confessor (cf. Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les origines du culte des martyrs*, Brussels 1933, 42) and pulsating with the same power as the body (cf. Jaś Elsner, "Relic, Icon and Architecture: The Material Articulation of the Holy in East Christian Art", in: *Saints and Sacred Matter: the Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. Cynthia Hahn and Holger A. Klein, Washington, DC 2015, 13-40: 16). Introduction in the fourth century of containers made of precious metals and decorated with symbols and scenes complicated the relic's symbolism, the same way that the icon's medium and visual formulas complicated that of portraits.

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About the Guest Editors

Michele Bacci (Ph.D., Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, 1999), is professor of Medieval Art History at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Before, he was a researcher at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa (1999–2002) and associate professor of Iconography and Iconology at the University of Siena (2002–2011). As a visiting scholar he conducted research at the University of Tokyo, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, and the Kunsthistorisches Institut – Max-Planck-Institut in Florence. Since 2002 he has been a co-editor of *Iconographica. Journal of Medieval and Modern Iconography* of the Società Internazionale per lo Studio del Medioevo Latino, and, since 2010, he has been a member of the international team engaged in the restoration of the Nativity church in Bethlehem. He is an honorary member of the Christian Archaeological Society (Athens) and an ordinary member of the Academia Europaea. In 2017 he was awarded the Hanno and Ilse Hahn prize of the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Rome.

E-mail: [michele.bacci\[at\]unifr.ch](mailto:michele.bacci[at]unifr.ch)

Vladimir Ivanovici is a lecturer at the Accademia di architettura di Mendrisio and a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Early Medieval Studies, Masaryk University, Brno. He studied ancient history and archaeology (BA, MA, PhD), before obtaining a PhD in art history from the Accademia di architettura di Mendrisio. He was a postdoctoral fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Rome and a summer fellow at the Dumbarton Oaks Library and Research Center in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Manipulating Theophany: Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400–ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016 and of a number of articles. His research explores the various manners used to materialise the divine in Late Antiquity, with a focus on the living body as theophanic medium.

E-mail: [vladimir.ivanovici\[at\]lusi.ch](mailto:vladimir.ivanovici[at]lusi.ch)

Local Editor

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome

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