

CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova



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Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean**

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Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity

Objects, Bodies,
and Rituals

edited by Klára Doležalová,
Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková
& Pavla Tichá

MEANS OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION IN LATE ANTIQUITY.
OBJECTS, BODIES, AND RITUALS

introduction

- 10 **KLÁRA DOLEŽALOVÁ, IVAN FOLETTI, KATARÍNA KRAVČÍKOVÁ & PAVLA TICHÁ**
Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity

articles

BODY-CHANGING TOUCH

- 22 **BARBARA BRUDERER EICHBERG**
Activation of the Invisible. A prolegomenon to the Evolution of the Consecration
of Baptismal Water in the Latin West as a Performative and Sensorial Act.
The Roman Rite (3rd–9th century)
- 42 **PAVLA TICHÁ & MARKÉTA KULHÁNKOVÁ**
Vatican Hill in the Time of Conversion. The Phrygianum Neighboring Old Saint Peter's
- 62 **ROBIN M. JENSEN**
Conversion to Jesus as a Healer God. Visual and Textual Evidence

BODY-AFFECTING OBJECTS

- 78 **GAJANE ACHVERDJANOVÁ & IVAN FOLETTI**
Purifying Body and Soul. Late Antique Combs, Their Use and Visual Culture
- 98 **ZUZANA FRANTOVÁ**
Luxury for All (?). Ivory Diptychs and Their Use in the Baptismal Liturgy
- 114 **JULIETTE J. DAY**
Materiality and the Sensation of Sin in Late Antique Pre-Baptismal Rituals.
The Short-Lived "Rite of the *Cilicium*"

COMMEMORATING DECEASED BODIES

- 128 **MEGAN BUNCE**
Shrines, Special Burials, and the Christianization of Britain
- 146 **ALŽBĚTA FILIPOVÁ & ADRIEN PALLADINO**
Converting Minds, Eyes, and Bodies? The Early Cult of Relics
Between Rhetoric and Material Practices in Northern Italy and Gallia
- 168 photographic credits



Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity

Klára Doležalová, Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková & Pavla Tichá

Scholars' understanding of the phenomenon of Christian conversion in Late Antiquity has oscillated between two antithetical viewpoints: on the one hand, in the understanding of Augustine of Hippo (ca 354–430), conversion signified a radical and inspired personal transformation¹. From a more pragmatic point of view; on the other hand, conversion can simply be considered a sober and studied social act to facilitate one's inclusion into a desired community that was becoming progressively dominant in Late Antique society². In a similar dichotomy, from the perspective of history and religious studies, the process of conversion in Late Antiquity has been viewed both as a turbulent clash between different beliefs, and, on the contrary, a harmonious and gradual transition in a society tending to favor "syncretism"; alternatively, a "mixture" of both perspectives has also been envisaged³.

1 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Carolyn J.-B. Hammond ed., 2 vols, Cambridge, MA 2014–2016. Cf. Arthur D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford 1933; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, London 1967; *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities – Creating Change*, Brigitte S. Bøgh ed., Frankfurt am Main / New York 2014.

2 See e.g. Eugene V. Gallagher, "Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity", *The Journal of Religion*, LXXIII/1 (1993), pp. 1–15.

3 For broader overviews on conversion in Late Antiquity, see *Conversion in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, Kenneth Mills, Anthony Grafton eds, Rochester 2003. On the much-discussed notion of "Christianization", see Hartmut Leppin, "Christianierungen im Römischen Reich: Überlegungen zum Begriff und zur Phasenbildung", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, XVI (2012), pp. 247–278, with further bibliography. For selected reflections on Late Antiquity and the process of Christianization as a harmonious versus disruptive phenomenon, see e.g. Guy G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice. Les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive*, Paris 2005; Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE*, Ithaca, NY 2012; *Une antiquité tardive noire ou heureuse?*, Actes du colloque international (Besançon, 12–13 novembre 2014), Stéphane Ratti ed., Besançon 2015. The notion of "syncretism" must also be questioned in the context of Late Antique studies; for a definition, see François Boespflug, "Le syncrétisme et les syncrétismes. Périls imaginaires, faits d'histoire, problèmes en cours", *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, XC/2 (2006), pp. 273–295.

However, these comprehensive theories on the processes of conversion, while explaining the nature of socio-religious changes in coeval society and in a believer's identity, have only marginally taken the strong presence and impact of visual and material cultures into consideration. To shed new light on the complex and often contradictory picture of the Roman Empire's dynamic turn to Christianity, it is precisely material culture that scholars in this volume address. Objects, bodies, and material properties of ritual interactions are treated here as bearers and creators of meaning, constituting the tangible dimension of "identity"⁴. The authors in the following pages argue that material – through its set of affordances, or with the use of visual, rhetorical, and liturgical "language" that objects are made to speak – shapes a person's subjective experience of rituals, places, and events⁵.

Initiation, visibility, and experience: means of conversion

The goal of this volume is to specifically address the role of material, visual, and ritual cultures in the Christianization of the Roman world: it wishes to emphasize the impact of materiality, which is perceived through sensual experiences, activated, and operating in non-festive time and during rituals. This perception is thematized even in Late Antique literature, while the approach towards the creation of complex environments can be observed in the monuments themselves; however, it has become particularly popular in recent scholarship following the so-called "sensual turn"⁶. Enlightening in this context is the text of John Malalas, a sixth-century chronicler who describes the miraculous conversion of Gelasinos of Heliopolis, a pagan mime, during a satirical theatre performance at the beginning of the fourth century:

"[...] In the presence of a crowd of spectators they threw him into a large bath-house tub full of warm water, to parody Christian belief and holy baptism. Gelasinos the mime was baptized, and when he came out of the tub and put on white robes he refused to continue performing and said before the people, 'I am a Christian, for I saw a tremendous vision of God in my baptism in the tub and I will die a Christian'⁷.

The story of Gelasinos in Malalas' *Chronicle* is one of the oldest traces of a broader phenomenon, the so-called *Taufmime*⁸. We may of course doubt that Malalas was recording a real event, although the practice of mockery baptisms seems to be documented by Saint Augustine⁹; however, for our purposes, Malalas' text raises several rather interesting points. First, it draws attention to the initiatory rite of baptism as a key step in the complex process of conversion to Christianity. Second, the ritual setting and action, in this miraculous legend, depicted as endowed with enough power to convert the actor mocking Christianity, seemed important enough to Malalas to include in his chronicle. The mentions of the warmth of the water in the tub, the whiteness of the actor's robe, and the reference to the moment of immersion all illustrate crucial elements perceived by the sixth-century author. They reveal both the importance of the material setup and the significance of ritual action in the actor's conversion to Christianity. Lastly, the satirical ritual also clearly emphasizes the visual effect ("I saw a tremendous vision of God") of the parodied initiatory experience.

The term "actor" takes on another meaning in the "material turn" movement, where it can refer to any participant in an action, sometimes including inanimate matter itself. The "material turn" urged scholars to pay attention to the production of meaning through individuals' encounters with objects and objects with cultures¹⁰. Subsequently, starting with the so-called "spatial turn", a more complex approach to situations composed of various physical components, the entire environment is considered a social construction



1 / Saints Protasius and Gervasius with Ambrose of Milan between them, San Vittore in Ciel d'oro, Sant'Ambrogio Basilica, mosaic, Milan, 489–511

relevant to the understanding of historical events, which cannot be studied apart from their tangible material setting [Fig. 1]¹¹. As we argue here, and as the authors of this volume show through a series of case studies, only a combined approach that integrates insights from the various “turns” in cultural studies can refocus our gaze on the impact of material, ritual, and visual cultures on the phenomenon of conversion that was, we believe, well-known to Ancient authors and creators as well.

As mentioned above, in the case of Early Christianity, conversion and initiation should be treated as inseparable elements. Within the art historical discourse on baptism

- 4 Reidar Aasgaard, “Ambrose and Augustine. Two Bishops on Baptism and Christian Identity”, in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism. Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, David Hellholm et al. eds, Berlin / Boston, MA 2011, pp. 1253–1276, sp. p. 1257.
- 5 See e.g. Philippe Cordez, Ivan Foletti, “A Convivium with Herbert L. Kessler. Sharing Objects, Sensory Experiences, and Medieval Art History”, *Convivium*, VIII/1 (2021), pp. 16–25 with further references.
- 6 For the sensory approach in art history, see, in recent years e.g. *Sensory Reflections: Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts*, Fiona Griffiths, Kathryn Starkey eds, Berlin 2018; Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2010; *Les cinq sens au Moyen Âge*, Éric Palazzo ed., Paris 2016; *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*, Ivan Foletti et al. eds, Brno/Rome 2018; *Aural Architecture in Byzantium: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual*, Bissera V. Pentcheva ed., New York / London 2018; *Icons of Sound: Voice, Architecture, and Imagination in Medieval Art*, eadem ed., New York / London 2021. Recently also *The Routledge Handbook of the Senses in the Ancient Near East*, Kiersten Neumann, Allison Thomason eds, London 2021.
- 7 *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, 12, 50, Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, Roger Scott eds and transl., Melbourne 1986, p. 171.
- 8 On the *Taufmime*, see e.g. recent contributions by Costas Panayotakis, “Baptism and Crucifixion on the Mimic Stage”, *Mnemosyne*, L/3 (1997), pp. 302–319; Richard Lim, “Converting the Un-Christianizable: The Baptism of Stage Performers in Late Antiquity”, in *Conversion in Late Antiquity* (n. 3), pp. 84–126; Marcia L. Colish, *Faith, Force and Fiction in Medieval Baptismal Debates*, Washington, D.C. 2014, sp. pp. 93–97; and esp. Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity*, London / Cambridge, MA 2008, with further bibliography.
- 9 Augustine of Hippo, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 7, 53 (PL, 43, 242).
- 10 Rick Dolphijn, Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Ann Arbor, MI 2012; Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs*, XXVIII (2003), pp. 801–831. Cf. Iris Clever, Willemijn Ruberg, “Beyond Cultural History? The Material Turn, Praxiography, and Body History”, *Humanities*, III/4 (2014), pp. 546–566.
- 11 Juliette Day et al., “Introduction: Spaces in Late Antiquity – Cultural, Theological and Archaeological Perspectives”, in *Spaces in Late Antiquity – Cultural, Theological and Archaeological Perspectives*, *iidem* eds, pp. 1–8, sp. p. 1; Barney Warf, Santa Arias, “Introduction: The Reinsertion of Space into the Social Sciences and Humanities”, in *The Spacial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, *iidem* eds, London 2009.

and initiatory rituals in these early centuries marked by the rapid spread of Christianity, scholarly research on baptisteries and baptismal fonts has always held a prominent place and has mostly featured fragmentary studies. However, our understanding of initiation should be virtually extended in time and space beyond the moment and place of baptism itself. Christian initiation encompassed a series of complex rituals, actions, and events, which both preceded and followed the moment of baptism and were all bound to some material reality.

The process of initiation involved three separate stages: pre-baptismal, baptismal, and post-baptismal. Each of these took place in different, specifically designed, spaces¹². Baptismal candidates, even before officially joining the Christian community, took part in its activities but their visual experience and perception differed from those of the “full members”. Pre-baptismal promises, exorcisms, and teachings were carried out in narthexes, atria, or specific *aulae* that were often embellished with befitting decoration. For example, the narthex of the basilica of Santa Sabina can be considered a place connected to pre-baptismal rites, as it served to accommodate catechumens after they were instructed to leave the church before the liturgy of the Eucharist¹³. To separate the catechumens from the liturgy in progress, the basilica’s main entrance was shut, and wooden doors with scenes from the Old and New Testaments became the visual centerpiece of the narthex – a well-premeditated material substitution for the senses of those gathered, which, in addition to its rich imagery, also amplified the sound emanating from the church interior [Fig. 2]¹⁴. Another case study features the wooden doors of Sant’Ambrogio in Milan dated to ca 386¹⁵. There, the Old Testament stories of David – with a focus on his election, unction, and victory over Goliath – exhort the future Christians to imitate the king, in accepting the initiatory unction and defeating the devil [Fig. 3]¹⁶. The closed doors not only allowed the catechumens to virtually experience the sacred, but they also materialized the future benefits stemming from joining the Christian community. After the pre-baptismal phase, the catechumen finally entered the baptistery that was typically decorated with splendid mosaics – a newly introduced artistic medium employed in Christian monuments – to be baptized [Fig. 4]¹⁷. Finally, after the sacrament, the neophytes again returned to the churches and were instructed in a series of mystagogical catecheses, during which they recalled their experience of the baptismal rite¹⁸. During baptism, the spiritual and social status of the candidates underwent a significant change. We may then contemplate, whether the places and images, which were created in various media and which the Christian congregation encountered before and after the rite of initiation, could acquire new levels of meaning and interpretation.

While initiation played a key role in the process of the Christianization of the Roman world, other fundamental aspects should also be addressed. Shining images within liturgical spaces, objects of daily devotion, clothing decorated with images, and the impact of the new cult of martyrs must have had a decisive impact on Christianization. It should also be stressed here that visual and material cultures played a notable role for another reason: objects, spaces, and images perceived through all the senses, and probably even explained by reading and preaching, were more accessible to the illiterate masses. In the world, where only 10% of population was literate, the majority learned narratives and customs through social actions, hearing the scripture, preaching, catechesis, observing images, and using the spaces surrounding them¹⁹. The socio-ritual engagements of Early Christians – whether the celebration of the Eucharist, the commemoration of martyrs, baptism, or funerals and visits to cemeteries – took place in specifically designed setups that must have left an imprint on the newly-formed social identity of Christians²⁰.



2/ The doors
of Santa Sabina,
wood, Rome,
422–440

3/ The doors
of Sant'Ambrogio,
wood, Milan, ca 386

- 12 On baptism, see Paolo Siniscalco, "In spirito e in acqua. Il pensiero degli scrittori cristiani antichi sul battesimo", in *Fons Vitae. Baptême, Baptistères et rites d'initiation (11e–vie siècle)*, Actes de la journée d'études (Université de Lausanne, 1er décembre 2006), Ivan Foletti, Serena Romano eds, Rome 2009, pp. 9–25; Roger Beraudy, "L'iniziazione cristiana", in *La Chiesa in preghiera: Introduzione alla liturgia*, Aimé G. Martimort ed., Rome 1963; Georg Kretschmar, *Die Geschichte des Taufgottesdienstes in der alten Kirche*, Kassel 1970; Angelo Paredi, "Il battesimo in età di Ambrogio", in *Il battistero ambrosiano di San Giovanni alle Fonti*, Mirabella Roberti, Angelo Paredi eds, Milan 1974, pp. 83–94; Victor Saxer, *Les rites d'initiation chrétienne du 11e au 7e siècle. Esquisse historique et signification d'après leurs principaux témoins*, Spoleto 1988; Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, Collegeville, MN 2007; Everet Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, Grand Rapids, MI 2009; *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* (n. 4); Robin M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Leiden 2011; Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Aldershot/Burlington 2006; Juliette Day, *The Baptismal Liturgy of Jerusalem. Fourth- and Fifth-Century Evidence from Palestine, Syria and Egypt*, London 2007.
- 13 An overview with previous bibliography can be found in Ivan Foletti, Manuela Gianandrea, *Zona liminare. Il narthex di Santa Sabina, le sue porte e l'iniziazione cristiana a Roma*, Rome 2015.
- 14 See Ivan Foletti, "Singing Doors: Images, Space, and Sound in the Santa Sabina Narthex", in *Icons of sound* (n. 6), pp. 19–35.
- 15 See Mariantonia Reinhard-Felice, *Ad sacrum lignum. La porta maggiore della basilica di Sant'Ambrogio a Milano*, Bellinzona 1996 and the latest summarizing publication by Gemma Sena Chiesa, "Intagliatore lombardo (metà del IV secolo d.C.)", in *Museo Diocesano*, Paolo Biscottini ed., Milan 2011, pp. 110–112.
- 16 On the initiatory meaning of these doors, see Ivan Foletti, "An Initiatory Experience? The Doors and the Narrative Cycle of the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, 386 CE", in *Milan – Imperial Capital and Christian Metropolis (3rd – 6th c. CE)*, Markus Löx, Florian Florian Wöller eds, Munich 2022 (forthcoming).
- 17 Ivan Foletti, Zuzana Frantová, *Mediální revoluce. Christianizace Evropy, Ravenna pátého století a jak obrazy mění dějiny*, Brno 2021; Zuzana Frantová, *Ravenna: Sedes Imperii: Artistic Trajectories in the Late Antique Mediterranean*, Rome 2019; Nathan S. Dennis, *Performing Paradise in the Early Christian Baptistry: Art, Liturgy, and the Transformation of Vision*, PhD Thesis, (Johns Hopkins University, supervisor: Herbert L. Kessler), Baltimore, MA 2016.
- 18 See e.g. Juliette J. Day, "The Bishop as Mystagogical Teacher", in *Teachers in Late Antiquity*, Peter Gemeinhardt, Olga Lorgeoux, Maria Munkholt Christensen eds, Tübingen 2018, pp. 56–75.
- 19 William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, Cambridge, MA 1989; See also the reflection by Gisella Cantino Wataghin, "Biblia pauperum? A proposito dell'arte dei primi cristiani", *Antiquité tardive*, IX (2001), pp. 259–274.
- 20 Lizette Larson-Miller, "Eucharistic Practices", in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, Risto Uro et al. eds, Oxford 2019, pp. 538–553, sp. p. 547.



4/ Baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte, mosaic of the dome, Naples, end of the 4th century – beginning of the 5th century

A transdisciplinary dialogue

This volume, therefore, targets the material dimension of conversion to Christianity, with the baptismal rite and its tangible properties as one of the key components of this process. This interest corresponds to long-term research interests of the Centre for Early Medieval Studies at the Department of Art History at Masaryk University in Brno. As a matter of fact, the volume presents the proceedings of the transdisciplinary conference *Materiality and Conversion: The Role of Material and Visual Cultures in the Christianization of the Latin West*, organized by the CEMS in 2020. The conference contributors regarded *material and visual cultures* as vectors and witnesses of conversion to Christianity.

The main inquiry sought to be reassessed was how these *material elements*, agents of conversion – above all architecture, various kinds of images, and movable objects together with the individuals who carried them – may have contributed to the process of conversion and may have reflected the reality of religious change and initiatory rituals. As a result, this volume covers – not only temporally but also spatially – a wide range of customs, ritual actions and their practicalities, spanning from pre-baptismal purification, through the moment of immersion in the baptismal font, to continuous changes in funeral forms in a society gradually accepting Christianity. The authors of the collected studies

consider a wide range of material and visual artifacts and objects that, on the one hand, acted as *agents within* and *parts of* the setup of the initiatory practice; on the other hand, those from the broader context of conversion, which could be considered as material witnesses of Christianization.

As explained above, baptism, a key moment in Christian initiation, should be seen as a “sensorial explosion”. Naked, anointed, hungry, and instructed individuals metaphorically died and were resurrected in warm water. Christians and their bodily experience – in reality and in depiction – are one of the interests of this volume. The touch of the human body is reflected in the contribution by Barbara Bruderer. The author understands the solemn consecration of baptismal water as an activation of water’s multisensory dimension. Its consecration represented a part of the creation of an active sacred space. Based on textual sources, the paper explores the consecration of water and the major shift from adult to infant baptism that occurred between the third and the eighth centuries. Markéta Kulhánková and Pavla Tichá focus on the *body as a space* in rituals and *lived space* transformed by those rituals, addressing bodily experience in the cults of Cybele and Christ. Their article illustrates how the perception of an individual topographical place, the Vatican, depended on previous or expected initiatory rituals, embodied in the individuals’ memory and affecting their affiliations to different religious groups. Robin Jensen’s paper deals with the touch of portrayed bodies. Her study shows that images of healing miracles performed by Christ were very popular. The direct touch of Christ’s hand, when healing, is indicated in contrast to other miracles performed indirectly by a *virga*. These healing scenes affirmed divine forgiveness granted through the converts’ new faith. The popularity of these images reflects the importance of the hope for resurrection. The key role of bodily perception and the touch of the human body features prominently in these studies.

As shown in the second section, movable objects – combs, pyxides, diptychs, censers, and textiles – were involved in the process of initiation, whether they interacted with human bodies directly or only through sight. Their role may have been decisive not only because of their actual contact with the human body, but also thanks to the potential they had to provide another space for repeating representational patterns [Fig. 5]. These “minor” objects are discussed in an article by Gajane Achverdjanová and Ivan Foletti, who studied ivory combs as metaphorical instruments of pre-baptismal purification. According to Zuzana Frantová’s paper, another type of ivory object, the Christian counterpart of the famous “consular” diptychs, appeared in an initiatory context to present the tradition and continuity of the Church by using a medium that had been employed by high-ranking officials. As such, it was an element that eased the transition from pagan to Christian Roman society. Juliette Day, on the other hand, focused on a rather unpleasant material or object – the so-called *cilicium*. This was a goat hair cloth, briefly added to the list of necessary materials for exorcistic rituals in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, meant to reinforce the act of renouncing Satan through the physical experience of kneeling on the disagreeable material. The cloth’s material character was meant to reflect the discomfort of the catechumen’s state of sin. Both luxury ivory objects covered with images and this scratchy cloth deepened the sensorial experience of the baptismal rite.

So far, the contributions listed have focused on living human bodies, whether real or portrayed, and their ritual interactions. However, deceased individuals – their memory and even their bodies – were present and significantly partook in social structures. In the case of Christians, the materiality of a dead body was crucial, be it the body of a loved one or the sacred remains of a saint. In this volume, Megan Bunce’s article focuses on funerary



5/ Pyx with the Women at Christ's Tomb, ivory, Eastern Mediterranean, 500s / The Metropolitan Museum of Arts

tradition and shrine building in Britain and Ireland, suggesting a relationship between funerary practices and the cult of relics in a time when this society was being gradually Christianized. Alžběta Filipová and Adrien Palladino then examine Ambrose of Milan's approach to the remains of holy bodies – relics. The bishop's efforts to emphasize the importance of the local martyrs Gervasius and Protasius and spread Milanese blood relics to other Christian communities through performative translations were not very successful, and the churches of Gervasius and Protasius were soon rededicated to saints with more prestigious relics. Ambrose's attempts, however, resulted in a general appreciation of relics and the cult of martyrs on behalf of bishops. The last section thus concludes this volume by demonstrating the customs and attitudes of Late Antique, Early Christian, society towards the bodies of those who had encountered metaphorical death in the moment of baptism, and the bodies of martyrs who actually died.

Eleven scholars in eight papers open questions on multiple “actors” of conversion, which the sixth-century chronicler Malalas was aware of, when he recorded them to convince the reader of the miraculousness of Christian ritual performance. These “actors” were material environments, images, the space, touch of bodies, minor movable objects, and the meanings they held and created on their own or in interaction with each other. The contributions illustrate the roles that material culture and sensorial perception may have played in a time when the Roman Empire was being continuously converted to Christianity.