Adrian BREMENKAMP – Tanja MICHALSKY – Norbert ZIMMERMANN (Hgg.), Importreliquien in Rom von Damasus I. bis Paschalis I. Akten der Internationalen Konferenz Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom. Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte, 12.–14. Oktober 2020, Palilia Bd. 36. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2023, ISBN: 978-3-447-11946-7

Scholars of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages have long considered the veneration of relics a core component of early Christian religious life and pious practice. It was a practice that, in contrast to more abstract forms of engagement with the transcendental, focused on material and durable manifestations of holiness. These included not only the corporeal remains of saints but also secondary relics which had come, in some way or another, into contact with the venerated person. Recent research has produced various studies focusing on individual cult sites, but it has also addressed broader themes such as the origins of the cult of relics, the movement of relics, spatial and architectural components of their veneration, the narrative framing of relics in hagiographic discourses, and the ways in which the cult of relics intersected with broader social, political, and religious trends.[1]

The volume under review focusses on the city of Rome, whose early Chistian sacred landscape can hardly be classified as understudied. But instead of addressing the many indigenous cults – of the apostles Peter and Paul or the many martyrs entombed in the Roman catacombs – the volume sets out to discuss the phenomenon of 'imported relics' or 'foreign cults', i.e., saints, cults, and their material remains that were introduced into Rome from elsewhere. In the introduction, the editors observe that these imported relics were part of the city's sacred topography from early on, and ask why Rome, equipped with such an extraordinary number of indigenous cults, saw the need to add on to this by importing cults from elsewhere. The volume's temporal frame starts with the papacy of Damasus (366–384), the first major advocate of Roman martyrial cults, and ends with the papacy of Paschal I (817–824), who reformed Rome's sacred topography by systematically bringing saints from the extra-urban catacombs into the city. While the phenomenon of imported cults and relics in Rome has certainly been addressed in existing scholarship, the richness of the evidence as well as new material, derived from archaeological excavations or the scientific analysis of physical remains, warrants further investigation.

[1] R. Wiśniewski, The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics. Oxford 2019; A.- M. Yasin, Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community, Cambridge 2009; see also the Oxford database on the cult of saint: https://cultofsaints.history.ox.ac.uk/.

DOI: 10.14628/gfa.2025.1. 115112

In the introduction, the editors review explanations for the import of foreign cults to Rome and then proclaim their objective to reconsider these models by acknowledging the "geopolitical entanglements of the late antique and early medieval world" ("geopolitischen Vernetzungen der spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Welt") and to tease out alternative actors beyond the papacy. Some of the chapters, which I will cover in more detail below, certainly meet this objective. However, the introduction misses an opportunity to highlight and reflect on the fundamental changes that Rome underwent in the period from the late 4th to the mid 9th century. These changes reflected Rome's evolving position in a geopolitical network; and they must be considered when trying to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the role of imported relics in the city's sacred topography.

The Rome of Paschal I looked nothing like that of Damasus. Throughout Late Antiquity, the city's population declined substantially; the urban fabric suffered from gradual abandonment as well as the violence inflicted by hostile armies (the Lombard siege of Rome in 756, for example, targeted the extra-mural catacombs and their cult sites). On a political level, Rome began this period as capital of the Empire, but actual imperial presence in the city was temporary, and this opened the urban playing field to alternative actors such as the senatorial elite and the bishop with his clergy. After the eventual disintegration of the Western Empire in 476, Rome fell under the control of the Goths until Italy was reconquered by Eastern Rome under Justinian in 554 after a protracted period of war. From the mid-6th century on, Byzantine administrators governed the city. Throughout these centuries, the bishops of Rome asserted their apostolic pre-eminence as successors of Peter and upheld this position in the various episodes of doctrinal and ecclesiastical dispute: whether in relation to the homoian Goths, or the Easten Roman Empire during the Acacian schism, the monothelete controversy, or Byzantine iconoclasm. The papacy emerged as an institution with religious as well as political significance; after being dominated by byzantine/hellenophone milieus throughout the late 6th and 7th centuries, the papacy of the 8th century underwent a process of emancipation from the East, not least due to rising political pressures in Italy from the Lombards, and turned towards the Frankish kings to forge new alliances, which set the scene for the trajectory Europe would take in the Middle Ages.

It is these parameters, and their transformation, that determined the mode by which cults of foreign saints were introduced into Rome: the agents who had the capacities to introduce new cults; the geographical scope from which relics were sourced or the territories whose relics were in particular demand; the architectural, topographical, and visual framing of newly introduced cults; the

type of saint (e.g., military, administrative, or healing saint) and relic (corporeal, contact, or other) that was available and/or preferred; the ways in which a cult, a relic, and its transfer was authenticated, narrativized, and remembered. While the introduction to this volume hints at some of these parameters, there is no attempt at establishing a coherent conceptual framework for their analysis.

The volume comprises 12 chapters in Italian, German, and English; each chapter concludes with an abstract in the respective language and a translation into either English or Italian.

The opening chapter by **Alessandro Bonfiglio** ("Il culto dei martiri stranieri a Roma e la questione dei calendari. Da uno rilettura dello studio di Emil Donckel") raises the question of how to identify the existence of cults of foreign saints in Rome when the liturgical source tradition with its many recensions is often confusing and ambiguous. Problematising the method applied by Emil Donckel (1936), Bonfiglio asserts that the liturgical evidence, such as cults listed in the Hieronymian martyrology, should be paired with archaeological and epigraphic data.

Maya Maskarinec's chapter on "Where are the Women? Foreign Saints and the Construction of a Masculine Rome" is based on the observation that only a small fraction of foreign saints in Rome was female. She suggests that the Byzantine administrators who dominated Rome after the Justinianic reconquest were keen to select military and administrative saints from the East, male "patrons of Empire". The sparse evidence for female foreign saints comes from more private settings that emphasised domestic values, as evidenced by the Cilician St Julitta venerated in the Theodotus chapel in S. Maria Antiqua.

The chapter on "The Relic Lists of Sant'Angelo in Pescheria and San Silvestro in Capite. Documenting a Shift in the Cult of Saints in Eight-Century Rome" by **John Osborne** centres around two inscriptions that commemorate the deposition of relics: one dated to 755 and set up by the *primicerius* and former *dux* Theodotus in the church of Sant'Angelo in Pescheria, which lists about 50 relics from mostly Eastern saints; and a second dated to 761 recording the donation of relics by Pope Paul I to the monastery of San Silvestro in Capite, which exclusively lists Roman saints. Osborne asserts that this change reflects broader trends in the 8th century like a gradual "estrangement from Byzantium" and an increased awareness of Rome's ancient and Christian history.

Andrea Antonio Verardi's chapter ("*His beatissimus praesul multa corpora sactorum requiens invent*: Politica papale e importazione di reliquie a Roma tra VIII

e IX secolo") further explores the climate of the 8th century when the movement of relics on papal command happened mainly from the suburban catacombs to churches inside the city walls. One possible exception is the translation of relics of St Dionysus/Denis from Paris to Rome, which a later Frankish hagiographic tradition attributes to Pope Stephen (752–757). Whether or not this translation actually happened is impossible to ascertain; an attested cult of St Dionysus in Rome could just as well pertain to the 3rd century Roman bishop of the same name. But Verardi convincingly argues that the idea of a Frankish saint in Rome was embraced by both Franks and the popes in a period when both sides saw benefits in strengthening a mutual bond.

Donatella Nuzzo analyses the spread of the relics of St Leucius of Brindisi ("San Leucio di Brindisi: Il culto a Roma e in Italia meridionale tra tarda antichità e alto medioevo"). In 601, Gregory the Great asked in a letter for the relics of Leucius to be transferred to Rome, to a suburban monastic complex on the Via Flaminia. While several churches in the suburbs of Rome were dedicated to foreign saints, Leucius was the only one in a monastery, which Nuzzo explains with reference to a hagiographic tradition according to which Leucius hailed from a monastic environment in Egypt before settling in Brindisi.

The chapter by **Simone Schiavone** ("Dall'Oriente a Roma: Le reliquie degli apostoli Filippo e Giacomo il Minore dalla recente ricognizione nella basilica dei Ss. XII Apostoli in Roma") focuses on the Roman basilica of the apostles Philipp and James the Lesser, commissioned by Pope Pelagius (556–561). Dedicated to two apostles martyred in the East, this cult site is read by Schiavone as an expression of Byzantine dominance after the final victory over the Goths in Italy. The chapter then discusses the scientific analysis conducted on relics that were found during 19th-century excavations under the church's late antique altar. The scan of a foot allegedly belonging to St Philipp revealed fractures caused by nails, coherent with the tradition of Philipp having died on the cross. The radiocarbon analysis of a femur attributed to St James produced a date of 214–340 CE, which rules out that it belonged to a disciple of Christ, but corresponds to the period of the 'invention' of James' relic in Jerusalem in the 4th century. Further analysis of the altar showed traces of contraptions likely installed to produce contact relics (*brandea* and holy oil).

Allessandra Cerrito discusses "Il culto di Santa Anastasia a Roma", attested since the 4th century. What probably started as a titular church commemorating its founder, later – in the second half of the 5th century according to Cerrito – became a place of veneration of St Anastasia of Sirmium. A hagiographic tradition narrating Anastasia's travels and martyrdom likely stems from that period

and emphasizes the Roman origin of the saint as the daughter of Roman nobles. In contrast to the shrine of Anastasia in Constantinople, however, there is no evidence of the veneration of her relics in Rome.

The following chapter by **Allesandro Vella** focuses on "Il culto di Tecla e le sue reliquie, a Roma e in Occidente". A church dedicated to St Thecla is first attested in Rome in the 7th century on the Via Ostiense and her relics are mentioned in an inscription of the mid 8th century. While the original Acts of Paul and Thecla state that Thecla ended her life in Seleucia in Asia Minor, a later variation has her migrate to Rome to look for her master Paul. Vella argues that the popularity of the cult of Thecla in Rome was promoted by Greek-speaking elements in the city, especially monastic circles. With Thecla's reputation as a defender of orthodoxy, these ultra-Chalcedonian monks might have actively chosen her in the mid 7th century as a form of opposition to the monothelete religious policy of the Byzantine emperors.

András Handl's study ("Reliquienimport und Krisenbewältigung: Episkopale Netzwerke des Papstes Symmachus und die Dynamik der Einbürgerung nichtrömischer Heiliger in Rom") is based on the observation that there is a noticeable increase in imported relics during the papacy of Symmachus (498–514). Handl explains this in the context of the Laurentian schism, when Symmachus was forced to retreat to the Vatican complex outside the city walls, which he tried to elevate through the import of relics, while his rival Laurentius held the city and the Lateran. Handl argues that most of these relics came either from Ravenna or Milan, which reflects Symmachus' Italian network of supporters.

In a chapter on "Felice IV (526-530), Giustiniano (527-565) e il culto dei santi orientali a Roma", **Teodoro De Giorgio** discusses the church of SS Cosmas and Damian, the first Christian church on the *Forum Romanum*. He understands the choice of the two medical saints from the East as a gesture towards Constantinople in a period when, after the end of the Acacian schism, the papacy sought rapprochement with the Eastern Roman Emperor.

Based on a reading of Gregory the Great's letters, **Davide Bianchi** ("Mobilità di reliquie 'straniere' nella Roma di Gregorio Magno") argues that the pope followed a strategy of asserting the Catholic faith after the end of Gothic homoian dominance over Italy. He initiated, for example, the translation of the relics of St Severinus, apostle of Noricum, to a Roman church which had until recently been in Arian hands. A potential translation of relics of St Andrew might, on the other hand, have signalled Gregory's attempt to forge close connections to the court in Constantinople.

In the final chapter, **Manfred Luchterhandt** discusses "Relics as Agents of Identity Building in Early Medieval Migration Societies: Rome and Jerusalem in the Aftermath of the Sasanian and Islamic Conquest". With a focus on the relic of the Jesus' crib, Luchterhandt reconstructs a complex network of interaction that materialised in the form of relic transfers between representatives of the Palestinian monastic milieu and the Roman papacy in the early 7th century, an age of increased geopolitical instability (Persian and Arab incursions into Byzantine territory) and religious schism (Heraclius' contested dogmatic policy of monotheletism). He argues that the arrival of Holy Land relics in Rome was driven by ultra-Chalcedonian circles who made sure that one of their most precious relics, Jesus' crib, went to Rome instead of 'heretical' Constantinople.

The volume presents a collection of well executed case studies which will certainly be a useful point of reference for scholars interested in late antique/early medieval Rome and the cult of relics more broadly. However, one would have wished for the editors to present a more coherent conceptual framing and ideas of potential avenues that this field of research could take in the future. What draws the individual studies together are maps produced by the editors for each chapter with a coherent layout, which mark the cult sites in Rome and/or the relic's/cult's place of origin in the wider Mediterranean. Beyond the maps pertaining to the individual chapters, the volume presents three comprehensive maps that mark all sites addressed in the volume: one of Rome, one of the Italian peninsula, and one of the Mediterranean. While these are certainly helpful tools to visualise spatial and topographical relations, the maps unfortunately lack nuance: the Mediterranean map, for instance, seems to include, indiscriminately, all sites mentioned in the volume without indicating whether it is the original site of a foreign cult, the place from where a physical relic was translated to Rome, or a station on a saint's journey attested in their hagiography; the map of Rome does not distinguish what exactly was attested at each site (an actual relic, a *patrocinium*, or a visual representation of a saint). For such maps to serve as a meaningful comparative tool, it would have needed a greater sensitivity to the range of cult and relic manifestations we encounter in the individual studies. It is no surprise then that the editors do not specify what insights exactly these maps offer.

In the end, it is left to the reader to discern the broader take-aways and conclusions drawn from this volume, which naturally depends on their respective scholarly backgrounds and interests. As already highlighted earlier, it is evident that the movement of relics was contingent upon geopolitical relations. However, the political fragmentation of the Mediterranean that left a transformed and reduced Roman Empire did not necessarily mean a breakdown in long-

distance relations; there was a keen sense for, and practical enactment of, a Christian oikumene that manifested itself in the transfer of relics, e.g., between the city of Rome and the Levant under Arab control, or post-Roman Britain, with the papacy emerging as the key player. This is very much in line with how most recent scholarship conceives of that period. On a more practical level, it emerges that while there were agents and elements that tried to regulate the cult of relics (famously, Pope Gregory the Great in his condemnation of the 'Greek' custom of dismantling bodies of saints), the reality was much more diverse, messy, and reflective of the respective circumstances. Through its collection of individual case studies, this volume is able to successfully illuminate the complicated reality of relic cult and transfer.

Nadine Viermann
43 North Bailey
Durham DH1 3EX
E-Mail: nadine.viermann@durham.ac.uk