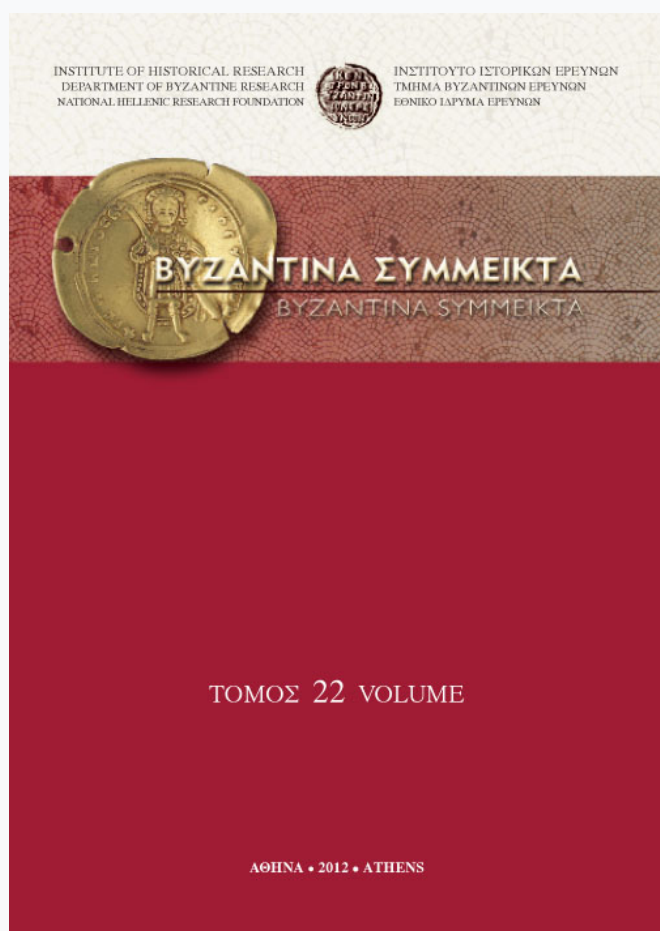


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 22 (2012)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 22



Βιβλιοκρισία του: GARY VIKAN, Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art. Revised Edition (first published 1982). Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications 5, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, 2011

Anastasia G. YANGAKI

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.1084](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1084)

Copyright © 2014, Anastasia G. YANGAKI



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

YANGAKI, A. G. (2012). Βιβλιοκρισία του: GARY VIKAN, Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art. Revised Edition (first published 1982). Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications 5, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, 2011. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 22, 357–362.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1084>

GARY VIKAN, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art. Revised Edition* (first published 1982). Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications 5, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University 2011, pp. 109. ISBN: 978-0-88402-358-6.

The essay *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* constitutes a revised and considerably enlarged edition of Garry Vikan's *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (first published in 1982), published to accompany a small exhibition of pilgrimage art from the early Byzantine period. Its author, Director of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, is a distinguished scholar of medieval art, who is considered one of the world's leading experts on the material culture and other aspects of Byzantine pilgrimage. In fact, in the "Preface" to this revised edition, Garry Vikan clearly enumerates some of the facets of pilgrimage addressed in the course of his book, stressing that his primary aim was: "To explore the portable artefacts of eastern Mediterranean pilgrimage from the fifth to the seventh century against the backdrop of contemporary pilgrims' texts and the archaeology of the holy sites" (p. 1). Given that the text has doubled in length as has the number of illustrations, which are high quality and mostly colour, that the author has integrated numerous secondary sources into his argument and striven to place the "world of the early Byzantine pilgrim within the context of late antique magic" (p. 1), and that he compares the analytical evidence he provides on early Byzantine pilgrimage art with data from the later period, there can be no doubt that the revised edition offers a far richer narrative and argument than the original work. What's more, it manages to present this argument in only 109 pages with content of interest to experts and in a style that is also accessible to non-experts.

The book is divided into ten chapters and includes an epilogue. The main part of the book opens with two maps: a general map of the eastern Mediterranean and a detailed map of Palestine; the main place names mentioned in the text are also marked on the maps, helping readers to familiarize themselves from the start with the main regions and places dealt with in the book. Each chapter is divided into further sub-chapters, making the author's argument easier to follow than in the 1982 edition, which lacked them, and rendering easier to grasp the main facets of Byzantine pilgrimage art—meaning, as Vikan states in his “Preface”, the artefacts pilgrims took home from the holy sites, their iconography, their place of manufacture and the purpose of the objects themselves, as well as that of the choice of specific iconographic themes to be represented on them.

The first chapter (“Pilgrims and Pilgrimage”) is meant to serve as an introduction to the book, and explains key concepts to the reader: pilgrimage, pilgrim and pilgrimage art—which is divided between portable pilgrimage artefacts or material “blessings” which the pilgrims took home from the holy sites, and votive artefacts or “thank offerings” that the pilgrims left at the holy sites—, the pilgrims’ motivations and the types of shrines and relics. The information is supplemented, as in the 1982 edition, with evidence from primary sources, such as the journeys of the Piacenza pilgrim or of the noblewoman, Egeria. However, in this revised edition, the more constant use of quotations from the Piacenza pilgrim’s journey allows for a more complete reconstruction, on the reader’s part, of a pilgrimage, with extracts covering every facet of a pilgrimage mentioned above. Additionally, quotations from Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Sophronius of Jerusalem and an anonymous author add further information on the pilgrims’ characteristics and motivation, as well as the attitude of holy men towards the pilgrims.

Chapter two (“The Pilgrim’s Blessing”) serves as an introduction to the next three chapters (“Image-Bearing Blessings”, “The Pilgrim’s Belief” and “Four Major Types of Image-Bearing Blessings”), since all these chapters refer particularly to the portable artefacts of pilgrimage, i.e. the “blessings” (*eulogiai*), and illustrate the material culture of early Byzantine pilgrimage. In chapter two, the complex definition of a religious blessing is explained in a very compact but comprehensive way: blessing by contact with a holy person, place or object; blessing by some substance (earth, water, oil etc.) that had previously been in contact with the holy, in which case the

portable objects used to hold and transport this holy substance became of interest to the pilgrims. In the sub-chapter “Function”, an attempt is made to present in a condensed way the various functions the material blessings (“εὐλογίαι”) served. The third chapter, (“Image-Bearing Blessings”) introduces a particular aspect of these blessings, that of images or/and words accompanying the artefact. In this chapter, Vikan uses specific examples of objects to highlight the three main forms of this decoration: a) themes directly related to the origins of the object (he uses the example of the *locus sanctus* scenes decorating a box in the Vatican from the Sancta Sanctorum treasure), b) themes referring directly to the circumstances of the use of each material blessing—the dangers faced by pilgrims travelling by sea, for instance (using the pictures on pilgrim tokens of Saint Phokas and Saint Isidore as examples), and c) themes combining both and referring both “to the circumstances of its origin and to the context of its use by a pilgrim in peril” (using a terracotta “token” of Saint Elisabeth as an example). Still, however useful this chapter may be as a concise introduction to the fifth chapter and the various forms of image-bearing *eulogiai* (“εὐλογίαι”), its division into three separate sub-chapters, each presenting a specific form of material blessing, accompanied by a very brief reference to its correspondence to one of the three general forms of image-bearing, but without any text to link together the presentations of objects which are seemingly very different from one another, may not facilitate reader comprehension. Further on, when commenting on the scene of the “Women at the Tomb” on the box of the Sancta Sanctorum, the decision to omit the comparison included in the 1982 edition with the Monza-Bobbio ampullae, which are well-known for bearing representations of the same scene, actually detracts from the argument. The next chapter (“The Pilgrim’s Belief”) seeks to interpret the pilgrims’ belief in the sacred power of the objects that came into their possession at the holy sites. Based on primary sources, Vikan stresses that material blessings were empowered with sacred power (“δύναμις”) simply by having been in contact with holy relics or substances. He also comments on the pilgrims’ belief that sacred protection could be acquired through the act of mimesis. A useful review of similar rituals and beliefs from the Greek pagan world sheds further light on some of these Christian practices. This chapter is a useful addition to the earlier edition, since it helps to better contextualize the blessings that are examined in greater detail later on along

with their meanings. The fifth chapter (“Four Major Types of Image-Bearing Blessings”) completes what could be considered the first part of the book with a concise but detailed presentation of the four basic examples of early Byzantine image-bearing material blessings: the Simeon tokens, the Menas flasks, the flasks from Asia Minor and the Monza-Bobbio ampullae. These correspond to the four major areas of Christian pilgrimage: Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor and Palestine. The basic characteristics of each example of portable blessing are given along with the latest bibliography and evidence and/or thoughts on their provenance and use.

The chapter “The Question of Authenticity” uses numerous examples from the primary sources to illustrate how the pilgrims perceived the innate power of the material blessing to heal and protect; for the pilgrims, this power was authenticated by the miracles the blessings performed, since they rarely paid attention to concepts of authenticity as we understand them today. The following two chapters (“Iconography and Ritual” and “Iconography, Sacred Power, and Magic”) are based on an analysis of the iconography of both the main forms of portable *eulogiai* and of objects of an amuletic character (such as rings and armbands). The chapters present some interesting interpretations which shed light on: a) the pilgrims’ perceptions, and the ways in which the powers of the portable blessings derived from their material or/and content are further enhanced by their iconography; b) the implied reference to the pilgrim in some representations, which seeks to transfer the blessing’s sacred power to its owner either during their journey through life or during “the passage to the afterlife”; c) the amuletic function of the *locus sanctus* cycle of images (sometimes accompanied by specific phrases) on personal objects; although the objects may not have been portable *eulogiai* (“εὐλογίαι”), they nevertheless served as sources of sympathetic magic through their particular iconography. The structure of this chapter, subdivided as it is into seven sub-chapters, makes the author’s arguments on these issues easier to follow than in the original 1982 edition.

Having analyzed what the pilgrims took with them on their way back from the holy sites, in “The Pilgrim’s votive” the author offers a compact presentation of the second of the two sides of the material culture of pilgrimage: the artefacts the pilgrims left behind as votives (“χαριστήρια”). These could be: a) simple personal objects of value, b) inscriptions of a votive character, c) image-bearing votives: the best-known form of votives,

these could be of various forms and materials. This chapter is considerably enlarged in comparison with the 1982 edition and contains further material evidence on image-bearing votives, introducing a short sub-chapter on pre-Christian votives, like the one on pagan rituals and beliefs addressed further above, and an interpretation of the possible role played by votives in healing pilgrims in incubation centres, given that iconic votives could have acted as intermediaries for the pilgrim's "sacred seeing" (p. 77).

The chapter entitled "Pilgrims, Relics, and Icons" moves away from pilgrims and the material culture of pilgrimage to explore the notion that an icon can hold sacred power by virtue of its "iconographic coincidence" with its "prototype": the holy figure. Vikan's argument hinges on a detailed reference to *acheiropoieta* icons (i.e. icons "not made by human hands") (p.79), specifically in reference to the most famous *acheiropoieton* icon of all: the Mandylion of Edessa. With this chapter, Vikan introduces into his essay a concept central to Byzantine beliefs: that, since "the icon looked the way it ought to look, ... it received the overshadowing of the sacred ... which allowed for the channelling of sacred power anywhere, independent of place-specific relics" (p. 82). This chapter thus serves as a sort of *avant*-epilogue in preparation for the "Epilogue: the Arab Conquest and Beyond", since it tends to unite concepts presented above with the evolving belief that icons, as sacred images, had sacred powers of their own. The iconography of the portable pilgrimage art of later periods, as illustrated by the objects analyzed by the author, clearly shows, as Vikan quite rightly states, this shift "from relic palpability and pilgrim participation to icons and intercession" (p. 87). In a concise way, the author comments on the different characteristics of these later pilgrimages and pilgrimage art: different pilgrimage centres gained importance, fewer holy sites, fewer and lesser varied relics, differences in the iconography of portable pilgrimage artefacts.

The text and illustrations are accompanied by a bibliography separated into primary and secondary sources, illustration credits and an index. The primary sources include references to various revised editions published after 1982, while the secondary sources also take into consideration the numerous pertinent works published after 1982. It is interesting to note that the author has also included works not cited in the text in view of their relevance to the general subject. In this respect, reference to the studies of THOMAS J. KRAUS ("Fragmente eines Amulet-Armbands im British Museum

(London) mit Septuaginta-Psalm 90 und der Huldigung der Magier”, *Jahrbuch der Antike und Christentum* 48-49 [2004-2005], pp. 114-127) and ALICIA WALKER (“A Reconsideration of early Byzantine Marriage Rings” in: S.-R. Asirvatham et al. (eds.), *Between Magic and Religion. Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society*, New York, Oxford 2001, pp. 149-164) could also have been made, particularly in relation to the eighth chapter regarding groups of rings, armbands and censers featuring the *locus sanctus* cycle of images. Similarly, reference to the study of ANNE VAN DEN HOEK, DENIS FEISSEL AND JOHN J. HERRMANN (“Lucky Wearers: A Ring in Boston and a Greek Epigraphic Tradition of Late Roman and Byzantine Times”, *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 6 [1994], 41-62) would have been a welcome addition in relation particularly to objects of personal use with inscriptions referring to the health of the wearer and mentioned in Chapter Seven (sub-chapter “Health and Healing”).

The revised edition of *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, with its considerably extended text which adds to the argument presented in the first edition and its high quality illustrations can and should be used as a concise monograph on the history and art of the early Byzantine pilgrimage. The multiple facets of this complex issue are explored in depth in a fluent and clear style which is accessible even to the non-specialist; both expert and non-expert alike can use this book as a tool for familiarizing themselves with the extremely interesting world of religious belief, magic and the intersections between the two, and for retrieving information relating to more specialized studies, should they wish to delve more deeply into the matter.

ANASTASIA G. YANGAKI,
Institute for Historical Research
National Hellenic Research Foundation