Material Evidence for ‘Maritime’ Religious Practice in Late Antique Asia Minor

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Recent archaeological studies in Turkey have revealed new physical evidence for late antique ships and seafaring activity, some of which is directly or indirectly related to what could be described as ‘maritime’ religious practices. This presentation will focus on several types of physical evidence for such religious beliefs and devotional practices from Byzantine Asia Minor, with the goal of placing newer finds and research into a larger diachronic and theoretical context and suggesting avenues for further research. Important questions for the Byzantine period include the extent of continuity of ritual practices and behavior from pre-Christian to Christian times: how much of the evidence for religious practices is consistent with older beliefs, and how much could be considered ‘new’ for the period?

This paper will examine three main types of evidence. Objects such as ship’s equipment inscribed with crosses and inscriptions with religious content and personal items from shipwrecks can provide insights into the day-to-day religious practices of late antique sailors and sea travellers. Ship’s equipment and finds from the Theodosian Harbor excavations at Yenikapı in Istanbul such as anchors, rigging blocks and other rigging elements, and sounding leads often include inscribed crosses and short inscriptions with certain or possible religious content. Some of these finds are remarkably similar to finds from the coast of Israel and show a great deal of continuity with earlier pre-Christian ‘maritime’ religious practices. Other objects from Yenikapı, such as reliquary containers, seem to reflect changes in religious practices as the Roman Empire became Christianized.

The role of pilgrimage and its relationship with late antique economic activity represents a combination of old and new religious practices along the southern coast of Asia Minor. Recent surveys of areas of coastal Anatolia have uncovered evidence for a settlement and construction boom in this period, including a spate of church construction along the coast in the 5th and 6th centuries AD. While the placement of religious structures in prominent coastal locations predates Christianity, in some regions there is little evidence for such construction before or after the late antique period. Such devotional activity appears to be related in part to the prominence of the annona route to Constantinople and to the importance of Isaurian stone masons in Byzantine-period construction projects, including the erection of churches and other religious buildings across the empire; this phenomenon represents a distinctive blending of religious and economic factors in maritime-related religious behavior in parts of Asia Minor.

A third source of information is the context of graffiti and other iconography with maritime themes in churches and other religious sites in Asia Minor. While ship graffiti and iconography have been discussed and analyzed by maritime archaeologists for technical details of ships and their equipment, the context of such finds on religious sites has often received less attention. Studies of specific churches as well as regional surveys indicate that this is a rich area for further study of devotional behavior as well as technological continuity and change in late antiquity. Textual sources such as saint’s lives, graffiti inscriptions, and early Christian and Islamic maritime laws add additional contextual details to our interpretations of late antique religious behavior.