

# **The Archaeology of Early Christianity: The History, Methods, and State of a Field**

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## **<1> Introduction**

The Christian religion initially took root in the urban and rural environments of the Roman Empire in fine city houses, crowded apartments, village synagogues, and scattered country estates. The first Christians who held the earthy theological conviction that the Divine took on flesh in time and place in Jesus of Nazareth were physically indiscernible from the Jewish communities from which they came and the Greco-Roman societies to whom they carried their message. They lived, worked, dined, and worshiped in the public and private spaces of the ancient Mediterranean, but, over time, adapted material culture in unique ways that expressed their identities, practices, and beliefs. The earliest recognizably Christian material culture was limited to certain contexts such as the mortuary inscriptions and wall paintings that advertised the religious identity of believers at death, or the modest buildings that served as places of worship. Eventually, though, the conversion of the emperors and the elite to Christianity in the 4th century introduced novel forms of religious architecture, and sacralized the settlements, places, objects, and buildings of the Mediterranean world and beyond. By the 5th century, the Christianization of the physical world had changed even ordinary ceramic pottery, bricks, and tile to bear the religious images of saints, crosses, and symbols in lands as far apart as the British Isles and Sasanian Persia.

Early Christian Archaeology to which this handbook is devoted is the branch of archaeology that explores the Christian monuments of late antiquity as well as the varied and changing intersections of early Christianity with the material world. A full-fledged discipline of “Early Christian Archaeology” developed in various European contexts in the later 19th century and is today associated with a vast corpus of scholarly literature, the acts of international congresses, and institutional support in university posts. In the Anglophone world, however, archaeology has played a relatively small role in the scholarship of early Christianity despite its clear importance for understanding the societies, identities, and backgrounds of early Christians. While a narrowly-defined Early Christian archaeology never took hold in the academic world of English-speaking countries, British and American scholars have approached the archaeology of early Christianity through other disciplines and fields of study, especially art history, as well as biblical and religious studies. These indirect approaches have broadened the conversation about the value and meaning of religious art, artifacts, and assemblages but also severed the foundational link between archaeological finds and the methodological and theoretical contexts that produced them.

Students and scholars of the New Testament or late antique religion have consequently been on their own in constructing a framework that links historical interpretation with archaeological practice. The reader has much to gain from W.H.C. Frend’s historical overview of

early Christian archaeology (1996); Grayson Snyder's compilation of archaeological sources before the reign of the Emperor Constantine (2003); and the growing studies of specific periods (e.g., Horsley 1996; Charlesworth 2006; Magness 2011), and cities and regions (e.g., Nasrallah, Bakirtzis, and Friesen 2010; Magness 2012; Burns and Jensen 2014). The steady output of a generation of historians of art and architecture has led to foundational treatments of Christian buildings and visual culture (e.g., Krautheimer 1965; White 1996; Mathews 1999; Jensen 2000; Yasin 2012), as well as a comprehensive encyclopedia of Christian art and archaeology (Finney 2017). The development of a Medieval archaeology in the west, Byzantine archaeology in the Levant and Near East, and Late Antique archaeology has likewise produced a sizable corpus of articles, monographs, and volumes that establish the broader social, religious, political, and economic contexts of late antiquity and early Byzantium from material evidence (e.g., see the *Late Antique Archaeology* series edited by Luke Lavan; and Rutgers *et al.*, in press). Regional approaches shaped by sectarian, national, colonial, and disciplinary interests have also contributed to our understanding of the early Christian world. Despite a strong academic and popular interest in the archaeology of early Christianity, there exist no comprehensive handbooks that synthesize archaeological evidence specifically related to early Christianity and survey debates in the field.

This collection of essays offers a fresh look at how archaeological practice has informed and shaped historical knowledge of Christian communities between the 1st century and the 8th century CE.<sup>1</sup> The thirty-four chapters in this volume provide up-to-date syntheses and new interpretations of evidence from more than two centuries of archaeological investigations of sites, buildings, and artifacts in the Mediterranean, Europe, and ancient Near East, offering an expansive survey of how different material approaches have enhanced and complemented our pictures of ancient Christianity traditionally based on textual evidence. The essays, also, highlight how archaeological methods are contributing an array of new evidence that must be read and understood in terms of the dominant concepts, procedures, and disciplinary contexts of archaeology. The ever-growing sophistication of scientific approaches, and especially dating techniques, will surely widen the gap between text-based and material approaches to the study of ancient religion and demand new venues for bringing scholars of different backgrounds and disciplines into productive conversation.

### **<1> Early Christian Archaeology: A Brief History**

The archaeology of early Christianity has a long and complex history that both converges with and diverges from related fields such as Classical/Mediterranean, Biblical/Near Eastern, and Medieval/Byzantine art and archaeology. We direct the reader interested in the history of the field to W.H.C. Frend's historical overview (1996), which provide an important synthesis albeit one oriented primarily to developments in the western Mediterranean. Our goal here is to provide

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<sup>1</sup> The end of the Early Christian period varies as political, religious, and cultural forces transformed material culture producing distinctly Medieval forms in the West and, in the East, the rise of Islam and the transformation of the Eastern Roman Empire disrupted long-standing patterns of trade and exchange.

a more focused overview of a field that developed quite differently in largely Protestant English-speaking countries than it did in typically Catholic and Orthodox continental Europe. A field that originally served to reinforce or challenge the narrative accounts of New Testament studies and ecclesiastical history has increasingly become independent of text-based approaches as archaeological investigations have become more sophisticated and varied.

The academic field today known as Early Christian Archaeology (hereafter ECA) had its roots in Italy in the wake of the Renaissance (Frend 1996, 11-22). The first explorers of the Christian monuments of Rome in the late 15th century were guided by the antiquarian pursuit of the ancient world that included classical remains as much as early Christian monuments (Schuddeboom 2017). While competing national drives to collect antiquities fueled classical archaeology in Europe, the Protestant Reformation infused the archaeology of early Christian remains with a more burdensome, apologetic role: assessing the Catholic version of Christian history through the material culture of its early believers. In 1632, for example, the Catholic priest Antonio Bosio published his exploration of the Roman catacombs in *Roma Sotteranea* as evidence for the deep antiquity of the Christian communities in Rome that challenged Protestant attacks on the Roman Church's ancient pedigree. While both polemic and curiosity guided these initial explorations, the first investigators forged a relationship between Christian material remains and the theology, history, and the institutions of the early church.

As the individual chapters of this handbook serve to highlight, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, which marked a period of antiquarian collection and documentation of churches, religious monuments, and small finds across Europe and the Mediterranean, led in the following century to more systematic study. An academic discipline developed in Italy in the 19th century for two main reasons. First, the Roman Catholic hierarchy put their support toward archaeological enterprises. Investigations of the catacombs under Pope Gregory XVI, for example, resulted in the spectacular discovery of the tomb of the popes in 1840, and Pope Pius IX established an early Christianity museum in 1851 and the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra in 1852. While these events can be read in part as a response to the growth of the secular state (Dyson 2006, 40-41, 107; Brandt 2009, 156-157), they marked a new investment of resources in archaeology. A second important factor was the emergence of a true pioneer, the “father” of Christian archaeology in the west, Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894), who first made material investigations of early Christianity an independent scientific enterprise (Frend 1996, 77-80; Fiocchi Nicolai 1999, 12; Rutgers 2000). Besides doggedly insisting on systematic excavation, de Rossi promoted Christian archaeology through his publication of thirty subterranean cemeteries (*La Roma sotterranea cristiana*, 1864-1877) and a corpus of inscriptions in Rome (1857), as well as a new journal, the *Bulletino di archeologia Cristiana* (1863-1894). As Dyson has described his influence (2006, 107), de Rossi “demonstrated his determination to raise a branch of archaeology often associated with ideological antiquarianism to the status of a serious discipline” (Dyson 2006, 107). De Rossi's important work, together with the papal promotion of archaeology, provided the foundation for

the development of a new academic field and the International Congresses of Christian Archaeology that began in 1894 and have continued sporadically to this day.<sup>2</sup>

The Italian developments, however, were part of a larger story of the rediscovery of Christian remains and their documentation and systematic investigation in other areas of Europe, the Mediterranean, and Levant (see essays in Part IV of the handbook). In most cases, archaeological explorations occurred in connection with geopolitical processes such as nationalism and colonialism (Frend 1996). Napoleon's campaigns in Syria and Egypt, for example, was a catalyst for the documentation and cataloguing of biblical and Christian monuments, manuscripts, papyri, and textiles in the Levant and Egypt (see **Strange and Brooks Hedstrom**, this volume). Significant activity occurred in countries with substantial early Christian monuments and a political investment in the Orthodox or Catholic past. In France, de Rossi's contemporary, E.F. Leblant (1818-1897), collected and published Christian inscriptions and sarcophagi between the 1850s-1880s. The French conquest of Algeria (1840) and Tunisia (1881), moreover, introduced Christian archaeology to North Africa where it served the role of revealing remains of the Roman and Christian past that justified French dominion in these regions. German scholars had more complicated commitments, but were involved in Italian archaeology from early in the 19th century and promoted the field of ECA in Germany (Marchand 2009, 252-291). As in Rome, Berlin gained a Christian archaeological museum in 1855 (Wischmeyer 2017), and scholars published numerous compendia and handbooks in the later 19th century. Throughout Europe and the lands that European powers colonized, these developments helped form national and colonial identities grounded in Christian faith.

In Ottoman lands, where Christians lived side-by-side with Muslim and Jewish communities, the state made sincere efforts to preserve and present Christian artifacts in cities such as Thessaloniki and Constantinople with conspicuous early Christian and post-antique histories (Crow 2008). Wendy Shaw has unpacked the development of Ottoman museums as an effort to negotiate tensions between modernity and an Ottoman identity that was distinct from European colonial appropriation and sensitive to the state's unique imperial status (Shaw 2003). Similar efforts to negotiate between unique forms of national identity and a Christian past shaped the development of Christian archaeologies in Orthodox countries. In Greece, the Greek Society of Christian Archaeology formed in 1884, issued archaeological publications by 1891, and played a key role in forging Greece as an Orthodox nation (Kourelis 2007, 395) that was both compatible with a particular view of Greece's Christian and Byzantine roots and resistant to expressions of intellectual imperialism that drew upon Western views of Greece's Classical past.

The divergent functions of Byzantine and Christian archaeology in Europe and the Mediterranean nevertheless found common ground in the emerging field of scientific, disciplinary archaeology which became all the more visible in the later 19th and early 20th

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<sup>2</sup> The seventeen international congresses were initially irregular but have been held every three to six years since the 1960s. Congresses have included 1894 (Spalato-Salona), 1900 (Rome), 1932 (Ravenna), 1938 (Rome), 1954 (Aix-en-Provence), 1962 (Ravenna), 1965 (Trier), 1969 (Barcelona), 1975 (Rome), 1980 (Thessalonike), 1986 (Lyon, Vienne, Grenoble, Genève et Aoste), 1991 (Bonn), 1994 (Split-Poreč), 1999 (Vienna), 2008 (Toledo), 2013 (Rome), and 2018 (Utrecht and Nijmegen).

centuries. In keeping with its international disciplinary status and under the leadership of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology in Rome, the first and second international congresses of Christian archaeology occurred in Split (ancient Salona) in 1894 and in Rome in 1900, and published the first *acta* in keeping with scholarly standards. Italy and Germany developed faculty chairs and the first university courses in Christian archaeology with the former drawing upon the long interest of the church in its own history and the latter leveraging a flourishing tradition of Orientalism and commitments to the exploration and excavation of the Near East. Everywhere the investigations of Christian remains themselves grew dramatically in this period with an unevenness that reflected the unique political influences, theological leanings, and colonial spheres of influence of different European countries (Frend 1996, 108-179). The International Congress of Christian Archaeology in 1900 included discussions of findings and archaeological work in the lands of Britain, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman territories of Asia Minor, Palestine, and Lebanon, among others.

Anglophone and mainly Protestant scholars made fewer major contributions to these congresses or the developing field of ECA through the early 20th centuries. British pilgrims and scholars visited the catacombs in Rome over the course of the 17th to 19th centuries but were largely critical of catacomb archaeology and its support for a Catholic vision of the past (Gaston 1983). British scholars working in Palestine and the Near East, however, were involved in some archaeological pursuits of Christian remains in the Eastern Mediterranean, following the same trajectory of colonial archaeology and Orientalism witnessed elsewhere, and fueled by the confluence of scholarly interest in semitic languages and the search for Christian origins. The founding of the Palestine Exploration Fund (1865) and the Society of Biblical Archaeology (1870) by British clergy and academics, for example, brought to light remains significant in respect to the New Testament. In Ottoman Asia Minor, the Scottish archaeologist and historian, W.M. Ramsay, visited the cities of St. Paul in the regions of Phrygia and Galatia (Ledger-Lomas 2016) seeking to prove the historical reliability of Luke in *Acts*. He demonstrated the presence of Jews in the Greek cities of Asia Minor, documented Montanist and other Christian epitaphs in the Phrygian countryside (Frend 1984; 1985, 12; Frend 1996, 91-107), and published with Gertrude Bell the significant monuments of Binbirkilise (Ramsay and Bell 1909). Moreover, O. M. Dalton collated a wide range of recent findings in Christian archaeology to produce a seminal introduction to Byzantine art and material remains such as sculpture, painting, metalwork, ivory, sarcophagi, and iconography between the fourth and fifteenth century (1911). In Britain itself Anglophone scholars made important contributions that drew as heavily on local traditions of British antiquarianism as the disciplinary practices associated with the maturing field of Christian Archaeology on the continent (Frend 1996, 27-28). The “church archaeology” that would develop later in the century represented a hybrid form of the more formal and academic field of “early Christian archaeology” that developed elsewhere in Europe (see below).

Americans likewise approached the archaeology of Christianity from a different starting point than Continental scholars, exploring Christian remains out of a broader interest in biblical or ancient sites. In the 19th century, for instance, Edward Robinson documented biblical sites

across Palestine (Davis 2004) and Howard Crosby Butler surveyed ancient remains in Syria (Butler 1900). Like their Protestant colleagues in Britain, American scholars gravitated toward the origins of Christianity and sought to verify the New Testament by identifying individuals, groups, sites, and places noted therein (see **Strange** and **Davis**, this volume). The newly-founded Archaeological Institute of America and the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, for example, began excavations in Corinth at least in part inspired by an interest in revealing the city described in St. Paul's letters (Frothingham and Marquand 1896, 231-233; Richardson 1896, 372; Concannon 2013, 60-62). American scholars, however, tended to favor the archaeology of classical remains over the objects of early Christianity and were interested in Christian origins more than the later monuments of the developed religion.

In the course of the 20th century, the archaeology of Christianity became more systematic in method, inclusive in membership, and broader in perspective. ECA maintained ties to theology and the study of the Christian liturgy (Brandt 2009, 157), especially among Italian and French scholars (e.g., Cabrol and Leclercq 1907-1953), but in the decades after the Second World War, scholars rejected confessional agendas and dogmatic approaches in an attempt at objectivity and broader inclusion (Wischmeyer 2017). The seven International Congresses of Christian archaeology held between 1932 and 1975 witnessed an ever widening array of participation. While France, Italy, Germany, and Spain remained the dominant contributors (comprising over 80% of the congress participants), representatives also came from countries across the eastern Mediterranean, eastern Europe, Middle East, and beyond, including Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Japan, and the Philippines. These same congresses continued to privilege discussions of church architecture, cemeteries, iconography, and catacombs, but subject matter gradually expanded also to include subjects such as monasteries and villas. French, Dutch, and German scholars contributed to the developing discipline of art history in a period when art historians were considering Christian art in a wider array of Christian, Jewish, and Pagan contexts within and well beyond Rome (see van der Meer and Mohrmann 1958; Deichmann 1983). The emphasis on formal typologies, and church architecture in particular, created the foundation for dating schemes that depended on the evolution of forms and styles more than textual evidence (Bowes 2008a, 576-578).

The published *Acta* of the international congresses up to the third quarter of the 20th century suggest that English-speaking scholars were relatively less involved in the conversations of that particular field,<sup>3</sup> but nonetheless made important contributions in the archaeological study of biblical backgrounds and specific archaeological discoveries. Americans were seemingly more interested in biblical archaeology than in the growth of Christianity in late antiquity, but could still incorporate the catacombs and churches in general surveys of the evidence for primitive Christianity and Judaism (Finegan 1959, 451-551). Americans also made important discoveries in the synagogue and church at Dura Europos in excavations between 1931 and 1933 and were involved in the study and publication of newly discovered texts. Scholars in Ireland and

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States comprised only 2-6% of the participants in the congresses between 1932 and 1975.

the United Kingdom explored and published Christian remains found within their own countries, including the unique hoards of gold and silver votives, and a wide variety of cemeteries, churches, monasteries, and small finds (Frend 1955), and investigated church remains across the Mediterranean (Painter 1994, xx-xxiv). While this did not develop into a national tradition of ECA, it did birth the important modern subfield of “church archaeology” from the 1960s and 1970s which has entailed an integrated and holistic approach to the archaeological study of religious buildings, in terms of their chronology, fabric, architectural structure, and the wider contexts (e.g., churchyards, settlements, regions, and beyond) in which they exist (Thomas 1971; Addyman and Morris 1976; Morris 1983a, 1983b; Painter 1994, xx-xxiv; Blair and Pyrah 1996; Rodwell 2012). Focusing on the historical and archaeological contexts of the numerous standing churches throughout the British Isles (see **Petts**, this volume), church archaeology fits within a tradition of British antiquarianism.

The most fruitful American contribution to the archaeology of early Christianity occurred in the discipline of art history. In the middle decades of the 20th century, the arrival of emigre scholars resulted in new research agendas steeped in European national concerns and practices that emphasized the close relationship between Christianity, the institutional church, architecture and arts, and the state. This was particularly evident in the contributions of Byzantine art historians who frequently approached the Early Christian period through the lens of rigorously developed architectural and art historical typologies that traced the ties between imperial and Christian iconography. Preeminent among them was Richard Krautheimer who fled Germany to the U.S. in the 1930s and produced one of the most widely read handbooks of Early Christian and Byzantine architecture (1965). His work provided a widely-read template for the study of Early Christian buildings in the Mediterranean through architectural stratigraphy and evolutionary typologies. At Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, Andre Grabar and Ernst Kitzinger modeled for a generation of American and Anglophone scholars formalist approaches to the study of mosaics, painting, iconography, sculpture, small finds, and architecture (Grabar 1980). While their work had the unfortunate effect of demoting forms of art (e.g., Coptic) that seemingly failed to meet the higher standards of Byzantine art (a view that has recently been challenged), these scholars gradually introduced and normalized material approaches and the study of Christian art and architecture among scholars of early Christianity (e.g., Milburn 1988; Finney 1993; see now Finney 2017).

In the last half century, and especially in recent decades, material culture has begun to make inroads into English-language histories of Christianity even as the archaeology of the religion has continued to broaden in a number of important ways. Archaeological approaches have become significantly more systematic and scientific reflecting assimilation of broader global practices. As in the related field of classical archaeology, archaeologists have become less interested in verifying buildings, places, and people known from texts and have sought to understand the wider populations and settlements almost entirely neglected by ancient writers. An emphasis on constructing formal typologies has gradually yielded to broader explorations of historical and archaeological processes and methods. The widespread adoption of stratigraphic

excavation, as well as the more recent use of radiocarbon dating, have given specialists relative and absolute tools to date contexts independently of texts; across the regions surveyed in this book, ever-shifting chronologies have continued to challenge historical narratives. Archaeology has shed significant new light on social and economic worlds of the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity, which has raised questions about the relevance of an independent study of “Christian” material culture in light of the plurality of Christian and other religious groups. And the introduction of new methods like regional survey, approaches like geospatial mapping, and technologies like ground-penetrating and electrical resistance, have made archaeological investigations of the early Christian world an ever-sophisticated endeavor that demands a range of specialized knowledge and interpretive cues.

The contributions to this volume reflect these developments that have significantly widened the scope of early Christian Archaeology. In addition to providing up-to-date syntheses of different regions and topics, the essays add a critical methodological dimension often missing from English publications on the subject. We asked individual contributors to address the archaeology of early Christianity from their own vantage points as archaeologists, art historians, historians of late antiquity, and religious studies scholars. Some contributors work in countries or contexts with a formal field of “Early Christian Archaeology” and others in countries for which material approaches to the study of religion mark a more recent development. Most of the contributors to this volume are field archaeologists or have experience with field archaeology, and are familiar with archaeological methods and the nature of its evidence. The reader will find a strong regional emphasis in the handbook in its overall structure and the individual essays, reflecting the recognition of the importance of local approaches for the study of early Christianity and late ancient society.<sup>4</sup>

## <1> **State of a Field**

### <2> *New Currents in Method and Theory*

The field of ECA has changed in profound ways since the 1970s as its practitioners have adopted the methods, practices, and conceptual frameworks of world archaeology and broadened their purview to social, economic, and cultural contexts. As in Mediterranean and Near Eastern archaeology more broadly, the archaeology of Christianity has become systematic and scientific albeit at an uneven rate (Lavan and Mulryan 2013; Lavan 2013a/b). A new priority of excavating according to depositional contexts--the natural groupings of soils and sediments, artifacts, and buildings--has drawn attention to the provenience of material, the original location of an object, feature, or assemblage. The recording of provenience through stratigraphic excavation has allowed archaeologists to produce and understand contexts, assign dates to strata, reconstruct ancient environments, and draw interpretations about human behaviors, processes, and meanings

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<sup>4</sup> The regional chapters do not correspond consistently with the boundaries of provinces or nations, which changed considerably over the course of seven centuries, but, reflect a modern heuristic for grouping the archaeological study of early Christianity.



in a defined space. Researchers have shed light on aspects of Christian life at the social margins of the Late Antique world including the urban and rural poor, slaves, and women (Brandt 2009) and complicated the elite and cosmopolitan perspectives offered in Early Christian texts by drawing attention to the Christianization of the countryside and expanding the scope of Early Christianity to include regions outside the political boundaries of the Roman Empire such as Persia (**Hauser**, this volume), Armenia (**Maranci**, this volume), the British Isles (**Petts**, this volume) or Islamic Syria (**Loosely**, this volume), Jordan (**Schick**, this volume), Palestine (**Taylor**, this volume), and Egypt (**Brooks-Hedstrom**, this volume).

Archaeologists of early Christianity have also benefited in recent decades from the rich literature in world archaeology concerning the formation of the archaeological record (Schiffer 1996). Material culture uncovered by archaeologists exists in a web of relationships between other artifacts, assemblages, strata, built environments, and an inhabited landscape. A host of natural and cultural formation processes have affected those relationships from the moment of deposition to the abandonment and eventual excavation of the site. As a result, some classes of material, such as pottery, clay lamps, stone inscriptions, brick walls and built tombs have survived with predictive regularity, while others, like the wood roofs common to early Christian basilicas across the Mediterranean, deteriorated quickly exposing fresco wall paintings to the elements. As these frescoes melted away, so did an important source for understanding how Christian ideas were communicated in society with minimal literacy. A better understanding of how such processes influenced the ephemeral and lasting character of material has shed light on the contingency of archaeological evidence.

Systematic methods and recording schemes has increasingly situated early Christian sites and artifacts within a broader living environment and set of spatial relationships. Whereas buildings, features, artifacts, and wall paintings were once read in isolation from one another, the association of materials has led to better understandings of the connections within individual spaces. In the catacombs in Rome, for example, researchers have studied the effects of light wells, luminescent objects, and wall decoration such as marble revetments in establishing a particular mood of light and darkness that was symbolically appropriate to Christian understandings of death and new life (Bisconti 1999, and **Bisconti**, this volume), but as **Parani** (this volume) has noted, these studies remains in their infancy. One of the most important breakthroughs is situating Christian sites in their broader material and archaeological environment as **Brooks Hedstrom** (this volume) has noted in recent work in the study of monasticism and monastic settlement. **Gordon and Caraher** have highlighted the work of Marcus Rautman in Cyprus whose careful excavation of three village churches at the site of Kopetra revealed episodes of repair and destruction in the buildings themselves and established connections between the site and Christian architecture on the island as well as regional and Mediterranean wide trade networks. This new impulse to situate archaeological finds within wider contexts has encouraged understanding settlement systems, the relationship between finds and landscapes, the adoption of the methods of regional archaeological survey. Contributors to the present volume recognize how both the greater attention to systematic excavation and

pedestrian survey has opened new windows into the dynamic processes and networks of relationships that produced Christian material culture.

In broader terms, archaeologists of early Christianity have also studied the historical contingencies that have shaped the survival of early Christian remains and this has led to more critical readings of texts. For example, scholars have recognized that the absence of easily identifiable artifacts datable to the 3rd century reflects in part the changing situation of the Mediterranean world and the networks that connected individual communities to one another; the paucity of material may say less about the absence of Christians than the nature of the period. On the later end, Byzantine iconoclasm in the 8th and 9th centuries led to the destruction of a large number of Early Christian figural images in architectural decoration and on portable objects. These historical circumstances have made even more significant the relative scarcity of systematically-excavated artifacts and buildings across the Mediterranean basin and frequently rendered artifacts or even buildings of pre-iconoclastic date isolated. The house church at Dura Europus in Syria, the Montanist inscriptions from Asia Minor, or the cache of sacred texts at Nag Hammadi in Egypt are truly remarkable finds, but their contribution to our general knowledge of early Christianity has been questioned in light of their exceptional survival.

In a related manner, a greater interest in the fuller range of “Christian” material culture beyond the staples of churches, catacombs, sarcophagi, and mosaics has led to more critical reflection on the nature of the early Christian material culture. Much like the conceptual shift of “biblical archaeology” to Near Eastern archaeology, the emergence of archaeological fields such as “late antique archaeology” and “medieval archaeology” has emphasized social, religious, and economic change as part of a larger consideration of the transformation of the Late Roman world. In the western Mediterranean, archaeologists of Christianity have debated whether the spread and development of Christianity marked the pivotal change in Europe or simply reflected a wider canvas of social and economic transformations of communities at the end of antiquity (see Brogiolo 2009; Rebillard 2015; Fiochi Nicolai 2014; **Chavarría**, this volume). Whatever the long-term outcome of this discussion, it is clear that the field has grown significantly in locating *early Christianities* and material culture within social, economic, and cultural contexts.

Situating religion within Roman and Late Roman culture has provided opportunities for renewed conversations between archaeologists and scholars of the humanities who have adopted material approaches in the study of early Christianity. Many fields of the humanities have embraced a “material turn” toward considering how texts and objects both function together to structure and influence ancient society. Scholars, for example, have become interested in how Christians navigated and understood a material culture shaped by non-Christian religious practices and formed a Christian identity through the reinterpretation and manipulation of existing materials and the creation of new forms of material culture (Nasrallah 2011). For later periods, the study of material culture has specifically shaped how we understand Christian attitudes to the economy (Bowes 2008a), the poor (Welborn 2015; Brown 2014; 2016), and pilgrimage (Frank 2000).

Intensified interest in materiality has likewise shaped the field of art history (e.g., Jensen 2008). While art historians have continued to refine typologies and chronologies of architecture and art, they have increasingly pursued a new emphasis on visual culture and rhetoric (Jensen 2008; Elsner 2001) which has, for example, highlighted the agency of buildings, objects, imagery, and viewers in shaping and communicating theological belief and religious rituals (Mathews 1999; Jensen 2000, 2012; see **Frey, Kristensen, Noga-Banai, and Peers**, this volume), as well as distinct Christian artistic traditions. Approaches to Early Christian material culture, at least in the U.S., have tended to be the domain of art and architectural historians or even scholars of texts, rather than archaeologists, but have opened up new avenues for conversation and collaboration.

In the sections that follow, we provide an efficient summary of some of the major discussions and important gains made from archaeological investigation. Our goal here is not to be exhaustive but to highlight common patterns that appear in the collection of essays that follow. We have divided our survey of Early Christian archaeology into five sections that reflect traditional divisions in the consideration of Christian material culture during (1) New Testament times, (2) the pre-Constantinian church, (3) the age of Constantine and his successors, (4) the rapid expansion of the church in the 5th and 6th centuries, and (5) the end of the early Christian era. These divisions are largely heuristic and obscure regional variations, unevenly reflect the changes in all forms of material culture, and represent an earlier, more textual approach to Christian history and archaeology. At the same time, these divisions also embody the complicated legacy of over 100 years of academic interest in Early Christian archaeology and an impressive corpus of diverse scholarship.

### <2> *Archaeology of Primitive Christianity, 30-150 CE*

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, texts dominated the study of Early Christian archaeology. Preeminent scholars like Adolph Deissmann recognized the significance of archaeological investigations in unpacking the textual record of early Christianity in the cities, villages, and sites throughout the Eastern Mediterranean (Deissmann 1908; Concannon 2013). This approach valued in particular direct material evidence for Biblical narratives such as the inscriptions that seemingly mentioned the two Roman officials noted in the New Testament, the procurator Pontius Pilate, and Gallio the governor of Achaia (**Strange and Davis**, this volume). Such discoveries offered material *realia* for the textual world of the New Testament, but the quest for direct equivalencies often stretched the nature of the evidence: an inscription from Corinth, which described the munificence of an aedile named Erastus, seemed initially to correspond to an Erastus noted in St. Paul's epistle to the *Romans*, but scrutiny of its archaeological context has shown that the stone was reused and dated well after the time of the apostle (see **Davis**, this volume).

An independent archaeology has done more than challenge or confirm biblical texts. In the course of the 20th century, the quest for direct equivalencies gave way to piecing together the physical backgrounds of the major cities known from the New Testament, and then eventually to

reconstructing the large-scale social, economic, political, and cultural processes which formed the first Christians' world. Pioneers to this approach include Gerd Theissen (1982) and Wayne Meeks's landmark, *The First Urban Christians* (1983, second edition 2003), which brought together texts, archaeology and history to construct "the social world of the apostle Paul" (**Davis**, this volume; cf. Harrison and Welborn 2015, 2016 for recent work along these lines). James **Strange**'s essay reflects how systematic archaeological work in Palestine has foregrounded the long and complex histories of settlements in the region, distinguished Jewish and Roman material culture, and transformed our knowledge of early Jewish synagogues in Palestine, as better chronological control has established a number of definite first century examples (see also **Taylor**, this volume). Archaeology has certainly revealed a wider array of non-elite spaces in the Roman world from rural settlements to urban tenements, providing a fuller picture of the varied forms of Christian domesticity, meeting spaces, and social and economic contexts of the emerging *ecclesiae* (e.g. White 1996; Billings 2011).

In recent years, archaeologists, epigraphers, historians, art historians, and religious studies scholars have come together with increased frequency in organized conferences to explore specific themes related to prominent communities visible in the Pauline texts. The resulting publications on Ephesus, Pergamon, Corinth, and Thessaloniki (Koester 1995, 1998; Bakirtzis and Koester 1998; Schowalter and Friesen 2005; Friesen, Schowalter, and Walters 2010; Nasrallah, Bakirtzis, and Friesen 2010; Friesen, James, and Schowalter 2013) have provided a whole "new model of 'biblical archaeology'" (Koester 1995, xviii) that has replaced an older aim of showcasing the geographic backgrounds of early Christian communities. These conversations have reinforced the chronologically expansive scope of the archaeology of the New Testament from the Hellenistic period to late antiquity and explored how contemporary archaeological practices have shed light on the religious, social, economic, and political contexts of particular places. This work parallels efforts among art historians to locate Christian visual culture in the wider material world of antiquity (e.g. Mathews 1999; Elsner 1995; Nasrallah 2011; Jensen 2008; **Britt**, this volume; **Kristensen**, this volume). Significantly, these have extended scholarly interest in the archaeology of early Christianity well beyond the conversion of Constantine.

### <2> *The Meaning of the Earliest Christian Remains, 150-300 CE*

Objects, art, and architecture of an explicitly "Christian" character appear for the first time in the archaeological record in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The corpus of known artifacts from this era, however, remains very small and has not increased appreciably in recent decades. Snyder's compendium of pre-Constantinian monuments, for example, did not grow substantially between the date of original publication (1985) and the revised version (2003). The paucity of material reflects real demographic factors such as the small number of Christians in this period as well as the relatively limited group of Christian elite who might produce the sort of signature that archaeologists typically detect. But the absence of evidence may also point to the nature of these early communities, their adherence to Mosaic proscriptions against iconic art, and their

blending with the social worlds they inhabited (Jensen 2000; Finney 1997). Indeed, the creation of a distinctly Christian iconography (Bisconti 1999; Rutgers 2000, 82-117; Snyder 2003, 2) and purpose-built places of worship often involved very minor or subtle changes to existing forms (**Bisconti**, and **Britt**, this volume). That Christians appear at all in the material culture of this period points to the numeric and material growth of the church as the catacombs and burial sites in Rome and other places attest (**Fiocchi Nicolai**, this volume). While it remains very difficult to discern religious identity in the material culture of this period, the occasional appearance of distinctly Christian art or objects still speaks to common patterns of community and liturgy.

Texts and burials represent the earliest extant Christian artifacts, but these frequently appear without substantive archaeological context. Scholars have dated major discoveries like the Oxyrhynchus *Logia*, the well-known Nag Hammadi codices, and numerous new papyrus fragments from Egypt to the first two centuries of Christianity on the basis of evidence internal to the texts (**Brooks Hedstrom**, this volume). Unfortunately, these texts have only rarely appeared in archaeological contexts or provenience, and are sometimes revealed as forgeries. A similar lack of stratigraphic context bedevils the study of Christian burials and catacombs. Letter forms and language date a series of Christian funerary inscriptions in Phrygia and Lycaonia in Asia Minor to the 2nd century indicating that Christian communities felt sufficiently secure to identify with their faith publicly (**Talloe**, this volume). The catacombs in Rome have inscriptions that date them to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE (**Fiocchi Nicolai**, this volume).

Mortuary contexts also provide some of the earliest evidence for a Christian visual culture. From the first part of the 3rd century, Christian catacombs featured art depicting biblical scenes of resurrection and redemption (Lazarus, Susanna, Daniel in the Lion's Den, Sacrifice of Isaac), alongside both Christian symbols and pagan images that could convey new meanings (**Bisconti**, this volume; cf. Bisconti 1999, 100-130 for an overview of common themes). Scholars have likewise long recognized the link between earliest Christian sculpture and themes present in funerary contexts (**Kristensen**, this volume; Jensen 2000). **Parani** (this volume) discusses the earliest lamp forms of 3rd century date with scenes of Noah, Jonah, and Christ, the Good Shepherd. Amulets with Christian imagery, likewise, appear as early as the 3rd or even 2nd centuries, with makers and wearers presumably seeking to harness the power of the Christian god for their own devices (**Cline**, this volume). Despite the troubling absence of secure archaeological contexts, the evidence does point to a distinct Christian identity beginning to emerge by the 3rd century.

The same century also saw a small number of buildings adapted for liturgical purpose. The most convincing and famous is the house-church at Dura Europos in Syria (see **Loosley**, this volume), which dates to before the abandonment of the frontier town in 256. Several other sites have produced buildings of Christian import such as "halls" (**Stewart**, this volume). Recent excavations at the site of Megiddo in Israel, for example, produced a room that contained an "offering table" and a floor mosaic dedicated to Jesus Christ dated by coins and ceramics to the mid-3rd century (**Taylor**, this volume). At Aqaba in Jordan, an apsidal hall dating to the late 3rd century and destroyed by an earthquake in 363 may be the earliest building specifically

constructed to accommodate Christian worship, although its attribution to Christian worship appears to be tenuous (**Schick**, this volume; Parker 1999). Scholarly have likewise dismissed evidence for early house churches in Salona and Poreč in the Balkans (**Bowden**, this volume).

During the 2nd and especially 3rd centuries Christian communities produced a distinctive material culture in the service of mortuary practices and worship. These patterns in the development of a Christian material culture form the basis for the rapid development of Christian architecture, iconography, and identity in the period that follows.

## <2> *The Development of Christian Art and Architecture, 300-375 CE*

The 4th century was a watershed in the development of Christianity, as the emergence of a new Christian material culture emphasized the link between the growing pursuit of the holy and objects, buildings, and iconography. The Christian desire to apprehend holiness in a physical way formed around the Eucharistic and baptismal liturgies, in particular. Basilica-style churches and their associated baptisteries, fonts, and cemeteries defined the ecclesiastical hierarchy, ritual and liturgical access to the sacred, and the historical Christian landscape (**Stewart**, and **Rutherford**, this volume). Constantine's mother Helena, for example, funded churches at important Christian sites in the Holy Land (**Taylor**, this volume). In Italy, Constantine himself initiated building programs in Rome, Milan (**Chavarría**, this volume), and his new capital of Constantinople. The new cathedral in the city of Rome, St. John the Baptist on the Lateran, included an elaborate monumental baptistery dating to the first half of the 4th century (**Rutherford**, this volume). Martyria like St. Peter's in Rome or hybrid buildings that combine reliquaries and mausolea like Holy Apostles in Constantinople also emerged in this period as monumental centers for the veneration of saints, relics, and the sacred dead (**Eastman**, this volume). These sites began the process of articulating a well-defined sacred landscape that reached from local shrines to sites associated with the Apostles and the Incarnation (**Taylor**, this volume).

Scholars have often considered Constantine's conversion as the primary catalyst for the rise in Christian material culture (e.g., Snyder 2003, 1; **Eastman**, this volume; **Stewart**, this volume; also see essays in Brandt, Castiglia, and Nicolai 2016). This argument has clear roots in Christian historiography: the 4th-century bishop and historian Eusebius of Caesarea celebrated the interest of Constantine, Helena, and later emperors in monumental Christian architecture and shaped how generations of archaeologists viewed these remains (**Taylor**, this volume). In recent years, however, archaeologists have used stratigraphic excavation, more careful attention to finds, and scientific techniques to challenge the long-standing Eusebian perspective, and as a result many Christian buildings once thought to date to the Constantinian age now appear more likely to belong to a later period (Bowes 2008a).

There are a host of problems to dating any early Christian building of course. The fragility of decorative techniques like fresco and the general dearth of distinctly Christian portable goods associated with ritual sometimes make the identification of the Christian function of a building or rooms of the building unclear. In many cases, later construction, expansion, and

modification of 4th-century Christian places of worship have obscured the evidence of earlier phases. Complicating this further are the often fraught claims of continuity with the 4th century foundations as later communities sought to associate themselves with the earliest plausible foundations (**Bowden**, this volume; Yasin 2012). Finally, as **Chavarría** notes for Italy (this volume), dating rural churches remains a challenge owing to the absence of secure foundation deposits and the ambiguity of earlier architectural forms. In some regions, rural buildings are underrepresented in the archaeological record leaving in obscurity the history of possible transitional buildings like the villa at Qirq Bizeh in Syria (**Loosley**, this volume); in other regions, excavated buildings have only been dated to the 4th century on the basis of problematic methods (**Talloe**n, this volume, for the problematic use of coins for dating in Asia Minor) or hasty excavations (**Schick**, this volume, for the prevalence of salvage excavations in Jordan). As a result, 4th-century Christian architecture is unevenly distributed across the Mediterranean. Regions such as mainland Greece and the Cycladic islands can only boast a handful of Christian basilicas or martyria of this period (**Eastman**, and **Sweetman**, this volume), and churches discovered in Cyprus, Egypt, Syria, Gaul, Spain, and Jordan date almost wholly to a later period.

The fourth century was important also in the development of explicitly Christian symbols and imagery in other media. The mid-4th century, for example, witnessed a transformation of Christian visual culture with a series of new subjects including Moses, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus (Jensen 2008). The images in the catacombs embraced New Testament subjects with Jesus becoming the central figure in both sarcophagi and wall paintings (Rutgers 2000, 108-117; Bisconti 1999, 124-130). At the same time, Christians continued to integrate contemporary non-Christian traditions in their art. Among the best known examples of this are Christian sarcophagi where patrons populated traditional bucolic scenes with Christian figures. Unfortunately, these impressive works of sculpture often lack archaeological provenience and context forcing scholars to rely on stylistic clues to understand production practices and chronology. It is clear, for example, that the same workshops produced both Christian and non-Christian motifs in marble sourced regionally. By the 4th century, amulets (**Cline**, this volume) and lamps (**Parani**, this volume) were widely circulating indicating that producers were taking Christian tastes into consideration, Christians were investing in objects signalling their religious identity, and a wider population including non-Christians found these symbols appealing.

The 4th century saw the expansion of a distinctly Christian material culture in the archaeological record across the Mediterranean. This included both monumental architecture that celebrated the wealth and status of Christian patrons, but also the reach of the Christian ritual into the fabric of cities and into the everyday life of believers. During the 4th century material culture played a growing role in the construction of Christianity as a totalizing discourse extending into all aspects of life (Cameron 1991).

## <2> *Christian Material Culture and the Archaeology of Late Antiquity, 375-575 CE*

The explosive growth of Christian material culture begins in the final quarter of the 4th century. The widespread production and distribution of Christian objects reflects the continued

deepening of the tie between material culture and the holy. These two centuries witnessed the proliferation of regional styles, intensified monumentalization of Christian structures in rural areas, and the growing influence of a Christianized elite on the urban fabric. The increasingly wealthy and Christianized elite expressed their piety in public and private spaces (Bowes 2008b) and provided an extensive market for portable goods -- lamps, fine wares, pilgrims' souvenirs, reliquaries, and other objects that expanded Christian material culture throughout everyday life.

The 5th and 6th centuries witnessed a period of complex transformations of built urban environments. Churches proliferated in urban centers as the elite Christianized patronage practices and civic identity. In Constantinople, the Emperor Justinian replaced the 4th-century church of Ayia Sophia with the massive domed basilica that continues to stand as one of the most visually imposing and architecturally daring churches in the Mediterranean. Various imperial decrees designed to discourage paganism across the empire in urban centers reduced many urban sanctuaries to quarries as their stones and statues found reuse in Christian monuments, but discontinuity was rarely as abrupt and spoliation rarely as dramatic and triumphal as late ancient sources and modern scholars have suggested (**Frey**, this volume). The accumulating archaeological record in fact has shown that traditional polytheistic cult, temples, shrines, and statuary persisted through this period and only gradually fell out of use amid the emerging Christian landscape (**Kristensen**, this volume; **Talloon**, this volume; **Sweetman**, this volume; Frantz 1965; Gregory 1986; Rothaus 2000). Other important hallmarks of Roman urbanism, such as baths, remained very popular, although they became smaller and more intimate buildings in a process that can only indirectly be attributed to changing Christian attitudes (**DeForest**, this volume).

In the countryside, the presence of churches and religious objects among the abandoned villages on the limestone massif in Syria, in rural Greece and Cyprus, and across Asia Minor suggests that the countryside was monumentalized and Christianized at some scale. Syria's famed abandoned villages averaged two or three churches per settlement, but only one of them has been excavated (**Loosley**, this volume). One small village in Cyprus, Kopetra, produced three churches which have all been subject to recent excavation (Rautman 2003; **Gordon and Caraher**, this volume). There is similar evidence for the Christianization of the countryside in Gaul (**Lefebvre**, this volume), Spain (**Chavarría**, this volume), and North Africa (**Stevens**, this volume). The spread of monumental Christian architecture into villages coincided with the dispersal of everyday ceramic table wares and lamps impressed with Christian iconography into both ritual and domestic spaces of the countryside (**Parani**, this volume, and **Moore**, this volume). Rural sanctuaries punctuated the Christianized countryside, like the great pilgrimage center at Qal'at Sem'an (**Loosley**, this volume) which was built around the pillar of the stylite St. Symeon in Syria or the rural complex dedicated to the fourth-century martyr Abu Menas in Egypt (**Brooks Hedstrom**, this volume). Long-distance Christian pilgrimage routes connected sites like these while the construction of martyria dedicated to various local saints similarly contributed to a dense network of sites associated with holy figures in urban and rural settings (cf. **Eastman**, this volume, for discussion in an earlier period). The development of reliquaries to



contain and transport relics associated with martyrs offered another opportunity for the projection of Christian history, beliefs, and memories across the late ancient landscape (**Noga-Banai**, this volume).

Finally, the 6th century saw the emergence of icons as significant devotional objects which like relics provided a rich opportunity to engage the presence of a holy individual (see section 4 below). Texts, architecture, stratigraphy, iconography, among many other formal and informal relationships, frame our reading of Christian material culture.

### <2> *Christian Material Culture and the End of Antiquity, 575-800 CE*

Over the last 50 years, the groundbreaking work of Peter Brown has reframed the discussion of the end of antiquity (Brown 1971). This work has had a powerful influence on the study of Early Christianity, particularly in the 6th to 8th centuries. The intersection of recent work on the Late Roman economy and church building, for example, or on the persistence of certain aspects of pagan visual and literary culture, has benefited from the convergence of late antique and Early Christian archaeology. Charles **Stewart** notes (this volume) that churches often reflect and represent the economic health of communities, and the economy has often stood as a measure of political and military stability in the 6th and 7th centuries, although this is not always the case as **Brooks Hedstrom** has noted for Egypt (this volume), **Maranci** for Armenia (this volume), and **Schick** for Jordan (this volume). In other areas, shifts in settlement patterns and new economic, demographic, and political realities led to the abandonment, neglect, or transformation of churches built in the 4th and 5th centuries. By the mid-7th century, the long-standing Roman ceramics traditions underwent rather substantial changes (**Moore**, this volume) and this has had a direct impact, for example, on our ability to unpack the chronology of Late Roman cities at the end of antiquity, which relies on carefully excavated contexts to reveal the late lives of ancient buildings. In other circumstances, the final phases of sites remain difficult to date and late modifications to standing buildings obscure the exact sequence of liturgical change. As a result, the late transitions from temple to church for even well-known buildings like the Parthenon in Athens are difficult to understand.

The chronological edges of the Early Christian period remain indistinct and closely tied to regional histories and ongoing problems with chronologies. For example, scholars have become increasingly skeptical of efforts to demonstrate that the Levant, Syria, and North Africa showed any significant disruption to church building as a result of the 7th-century wars with Persia and the Arabs, and instead argue for a gradual decline in church building perhaps more associated with changes in the economy and settlement than religious change (**Loosley**, this volume; **Schick**, this volume; **Brooks Hedstrom**, this volume). Armenia, in contrast, witnessed an architectural and sculptural flourishing over the course of the 7th century that continued into the 8th century (**Maranci**, this volume). In Asia Minor and the Balkans, economic pressures, invasions, and, perhaps more fundamentally, the transformation of the ancient city and its elite introduced both new contexts and forms of Christian material culture. The same is true in the West where the emergence of monasticism, new forms of settlements, and the severing of secular

authority from the authority of the institutional church intensified the emergence of architectural types and regional forms of expression. The establishment of the Merovingians in Gaul, for example, and the Ostrogoths and Lombards in Italy produced expressions of Christian kingship for a new class of post-Roman political elites. These processes were uneven across the Early Christian world and change was incremental. Archaeological methods continue to allow scholars to parse ever more finely the chronological and regional variation in Christian material culture. At the same time, archaeologists and historians continue to consider when the “early” period of Christian material culture gives way to a more mature form.

### <1> Prospects

As the archaeology of Early Christianity continues to converge with major currents in world archaeology, it follows a trajectory that fortifies material culture as an independent source of knowledge about the early Christian past. The field remains closely aligned with traditional sites of biblical and ecclesiastical importance, architectural forms, and iconographic traditions that ensure continuity with the long tradition sketched out in cursory form in this introduction. Yet, as so many the essays in this handbook indicate, archaeology no longer serves the simple purpose of illustrating or ground truthing Christian texts. In exceptional cases--famous buildings, important cities, sacred landscapes--the two forms of evidence may be brought together in a complementary and mutually supporting way to create an integrated narrative (this volume, chapters by **Eastman**, and **Taylor**), to nuance and challenge textual accounts, or to show how Christian monuments encouraged, inspired, or spawned a later literary tradition (**Stewart**, and **Frey**, this volume; cf. Hall 2014, 187-206). More frequently, though, texts and material culture are chronologically, spatially, or thematically out of sync (Bowes 2008a; **Brooks Hedstrom**, this volume) and the disjuncture demand a kind of interaction and integration that respects the rules of each kind of evidence (**Chavarría**, this essay (Spain essay); cf. Sauer 2004). The chapters in this handbook underscore the need for richer, contextualized local studies of buildings, cities, and regions using the full array of material evidence available (e.g., **Stevens**, this volume). Studies grounded in stratigraphy and systematic method may ultimately enable scholars to write narratives from material culture alone (Brandt 2009) that can be integrated into larger pictures of the early Christian world.

The revolutionary adoption of a variety of technologies and approaches promises to highlight far more about local and regional contexts than ever before. The continued interest in scientific practices range from efforts to date early Christian monuments using dendrochronology or C-14 to photogrammetry and 3D reconstruction to the use of remote sensing technology to document buildings without excavation. These advances have expanded the traditional tool kit of excavation, seriation, typologies, and stratigraphy to produce meaningful, if relative, chronological relationships between sites and between classes of artifacts. The use of AMS mortar dating, dendrochronology, and other scientific approaches to measuring absolute age will refine archaeologists’ abilities to link archaeological material to events more closely datable in textual sources (**Strange**; **Brooks Hedstrom** this volume). At the same time,

the more systematic use of remote sensing and geophysical survey technologies to locate and identify buildings on and beneath the surface may potentially offer a way to expand the number of known buildings, especially in remote or difficult of access locations where traditional excavation is simply unviable. Finally, greater attention to the chemical composition of ceramics, plaster in wall painting, and even marble should play a growing role in articulating the economic relationships between areas, the role of various work crews in constructing Christian buildings, and patronage practices that simple typological or unaided visual inspection of artifacts and decoration cannot reveal.

The injection of a wide range of new technologies, however, does not offer a silver bullet for understanding the early Christian world and ultimately encourages greater reflexivity about what can and cannot be said from archaeological contexts. Although these scientific approaches present new ways of approaching chronology, regional connections, and spaces, they have real limitations ranging from expense and access to specialized training, and the time needed to process samples and data. Technology, moreover, cannot easily answer the interpretive bane of Christian archaeology, namely, recognizing material culture as “Christian” or identifying Christians and other religious groups in excavated and surveyed contexts (Elsner 2003; Bowes 2008a, 575; Brandt 2009). The essays in the volume highlight the complexities of the relationship between material culture and Christian identities. Certain liturgical spaces, such as churches, martyria, and baptisteries, are obviously places of worship, but it has proven difficult to finetune theological distinctions. While in principle basilica church architecture may communicate orthodoxy (**Stewart**, this volume), theological differences often remain materially elusive (**Stevens**, and **Brooks Hedstrom (monasticism)**, this volume). In secure contexts such as the catacombs, early Christian art may be read as responses to theological controversies (e.g., **Bisconti**, this volume), but most objects produced, exchanged, and used by Christians continue to prompt questions about identification (**Parani**, and **Moore**, this volume). Scholars must approach local contexts with a better toolkit for understanding the complexities of Christian identity (Rebillard 2015).

Archaeology is usually more reliable in providing the broader context for the rise and development of Christianity in the Mediterranean. Interest in climate science, for example, has just started to explore connections between the “Late Antique Little Ice Age” and the rise of Christianity and Islam in the 6th and 8th centuries (e.g. McCormick 2012; Brooke 2014; Izdebski et al. 2016; Haldon 2016; Büntgen *et al.* 2016 with citations). This work steers clear of simplistic environmental determinism and instead locates the workings of culture within a dense network of human and environmental factors. Recent work in bioarchaeology, and paleo-epidemiology in particular, has refined our understanding of the various Mediterranean wide plagues in the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th centuries which appear in the work of early Christian authors and clearly shaped the mortuary landscape of Christian communities (Harper 2015, 2016; McCormick 2012, 2015a, 2016). Like climate change and other environmental factors, the biological and microbial landscape of the ancient world also shaped the development of Christianity and Christian culture (Little 2007; Stark 1996).

The archaeology of Late Antiquity has increasingly extended the chronological and geographic limits of the ancient world beyond the conventional definitions. As efforts to refine the chronologies of Late Roman sites and monuments have demonstrated, the economic, social, and cultural relationships that defined the ancient world persisted centuries later than earlier scholars had anticipated. The conversion of the Roman world to Christianity now appears as a much longer and less thorough process, and there is growing evidence that longstanding economic relationships persisted into the 7th and 8th centuries and Early Christian communities continued to thrive even during the disruptions of the Arab invasions of Asia and North Africa (Cameron 2002). At the same time, the expanded geographic range of the Late Antique world has extended interest to exploring the spread of economic and political relationships, including those affecting the Christian church, across Asia and into Northern Europe. The chronological and geographic redefinition of Late Antiquity is part of a larger process of redefining the origins of the West at the end of the ancient world, and the distinct place of Christianity within this narrative will continue to play a key role in this reconsideration as well.

The convergence of ECA with the larger discipline of Mediterranean archaeology has also expanded the contexts in which scholars have understood early Christian monuments and artifacts. Churches, martyria, and baptisteries continue to be studied for Christian iconography, liturgical practices, and Christianization, but they also represent important manifestations of economic organization, administrative functions, and even social order. Phenomena like pilgrimage, the production of objects with Christian symbols, and the manual craft and decoration of monumental Christian buildings offer significant evidence for organization of labor, connections between regions, and the economic health of communities. Churches and artifacts associated with Christian practice have come to stand as surrogates for settlement, particularly in the countryside, and contributed to arguments for rural settlement patterns and integration of rural and urban life in the Roman world (e.g., Mas Florit and Cau Ontiveros 2013).

These new directions in the study of Christian archaeology have emphasized the embedded nature of Christian practices, objects, and culture within the wider contexts of the Roman and Late Roman Mediterranean. Objects, the environment, and even microbial entities all contributed to the network of relationships in which Christianity developed. For the most part, archaeologists of early Christianity have only begun to explore the potential of understanding the development of Christian culture amid this dense web of relations and to recognize the potential of applying theories of agency, materiality, and the critical attention to ontology and phenomenology to sites, buildings, and artifacts associated with Christianity. The chapters by **Noga Banai** and **Glenn Peers** in this volume offer interesting object biographies that illuminate the stories of portable sacred objects and their human connections. Such entangled approaches, which are common to broader archaeological interests (e.g. Hodder 2012, with citations), offer a promising route to rethinking the archaeology of Early Christianity.

The past and future of Early Christian archaeology rests firmly on its autonomy as a source of knowledge about the early Christian past. This autonomy, however, has never undermined its deep connection with other approaches and other evidence for the first Christian

centuries. This tension between its status as an independent source of historical knowledge and its close connections to the study of texts, art, ritual, and theology has ensured its ongoing relevance to scholars committed to understanding both these transformative centuries and the emergence of Christianity as a world religion. The last few decades have seen the archaeology of early Christianity tap more fully into currents developed in world archaeology as well as by their colleagues in Classical, Mediterranean, and Near Eastern archaeology. This has opened the field to new methods, new technologies, new critiques, and new ways of understanding and presenting the Early Christian world. The contributions presented in this volume capture the field both in terms of the major currents of its past and its ongoing transformation and future.

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