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Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium

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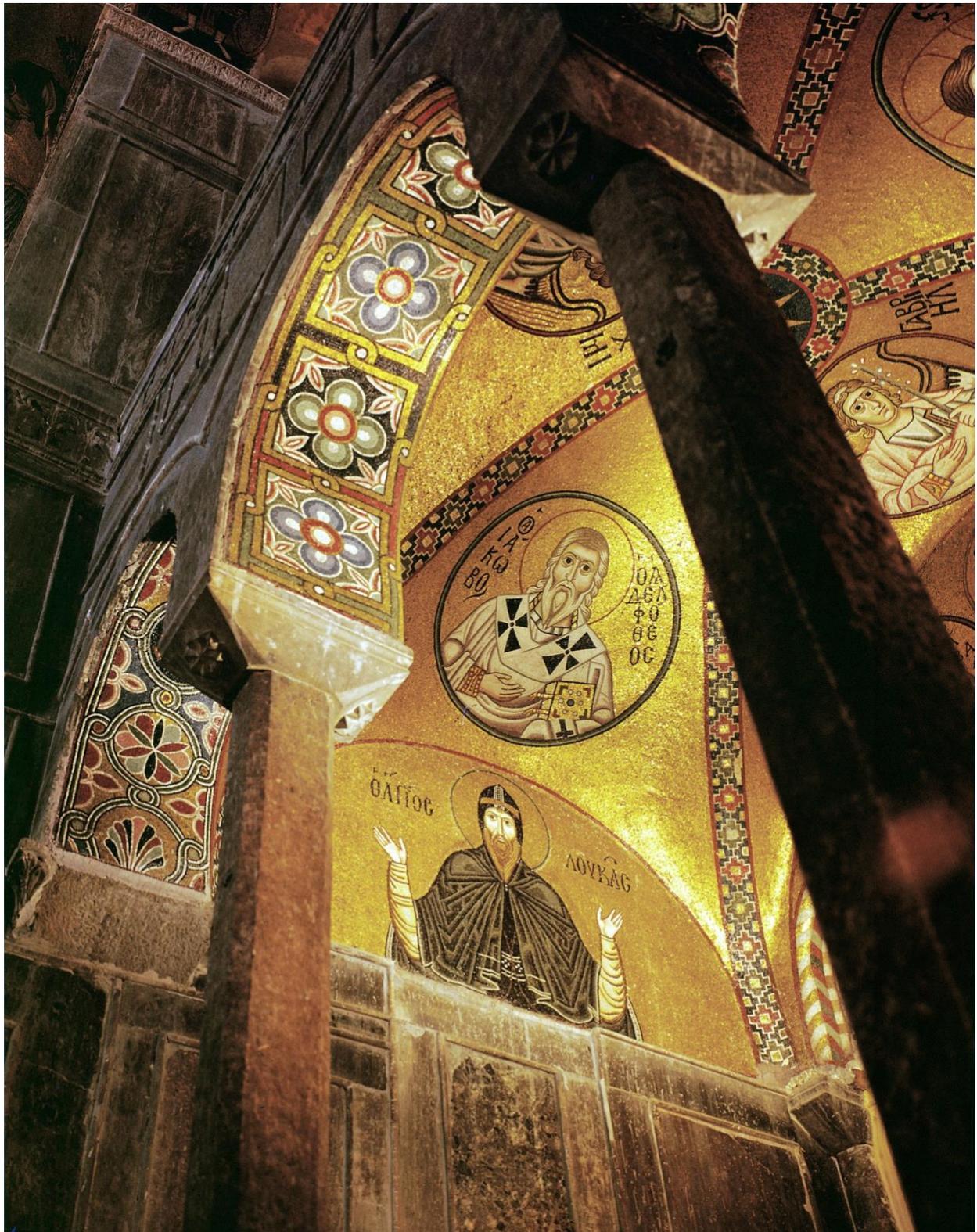


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Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium

Edited by Jelena Bogdanović

Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium seeks to reveal Christian understanding of the body and sacred space in the medieval Mediterranean. Case studies examine encounters with the holy through the perspective of the human body and sensory dimensions of sacred space, and discuss the dynamics of perception when experiencing what was constructed, represented, and understood as sacred. The comparative analysis investigates viewers' recognitions of the sacred in specific locations or segments of space with an emphasis on the experiential and conceptual relationships between sacred spaces and human bodies. This volume thus reassesses the empowering aspects of space, time, and human agency in religious contexts. By focusing on investigations of human endeavors towards experiential and visual expressions that shape perceptions of holiness, this study ultimately aims to present a better understanding of the corporeality of sacred art and architecture. The research points to how early Christians and Byzantines teleologically viewed the divine source of the sacred in terms of its ability to bring together – but never fully dissolve – the distinctions between the human and divine realms. The revealed mechanisms of iconic perception and noetic contemplation have the potential to shape knowledge of the meanings of the sacred as well as to improve our understanding of the liminality of the profane and the sacred.

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Jelena Bogdanović, ed.

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Introduction: Encounters With the Holy

Jelena Bogdanović

This book *Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium* joins the burgeoning scholarship on the sacred and, by asking questions about the ways medieval people encountered the holy, offers new perspectives on the understanding of the role of the body and perceptible dimensions of sacred space in the medieval Mediterranean. For the Christians in the medieval Mediterranean, “the sacred” became manifested through the presence of Christ, who “became flesh and *tabernacled* among us” (Jn 1:14). For the devotees, the humanity of Jesus Christ resulted into interconnected notions about the holy expressed through the human body and place as a segment of space that is physical, localized, specific, and rational.¹ However, in Christian terms, the seemingly stark divisions between body and soul, mind and senses, place and space in the abstract are constantly negotiated and balanced between God’s revelation among humans in the locales of inhabited space and ultimately the immaterial and placeless God.² Moreover, as Michel de Certeau contends, the encounters with the holy for Christians imply their relationships to God as *the event* of Jesus Christ.³ Indeed, de Certeau is correct that the event of Christ inaugurated Christianity but also subsequent events within the life of the church, which are seemingly paradoxical as they are necessarily different from the first, inaugural event while at the same time are perceived as being focused on and faithful to this foundational event.⁴ When analyzing place, memory, and identity of the sacred, Philip Sheldrake wittingly remarked that even the place of Jesus, the Tomb of Christ, which is conspicuously empty of any bodily remains, points to the perpetual movement of the faithful

“following after” the divine in the direction of Jesus’ departure.⁵ Therefore, the holy is never inactive and, even if perceived through bodily senses and the physical characteristics of space, for the believers remains inclusive of its abstract qualities.

Yet, how do we study these encounters with the holy? Scholarly studies of the sacred are continually suspended between positivist and interpretative studies; between the increasingly theorizing search for objective and objectified understanding of the sacred studied through palpable and verifiable references and those searches that attempt to address, albeit uncomfortably, the elusive, abstract, and ideal features of the sacred and questions as how given individuals within given contexts interpret these abstract qualities of sacred phenomena. Hence, many studies of the sacred, regardless of the primary interest of the discipline in the material world, revolve around the understanding of the material, inhabited world as critical for the perception of the holy. Various phenomenological approaches address the cognitive understanding of direct experiences related to body and space. Semiotics enriches the ways in which we make meaning of various material objects associated with the holy. For archeologists, art and architectural historians of the medieval Mediterranean, the starting point in material culture comes as an expected response. However, in the parlance of the current scholarly discourse on the sacred and its corporeality, the scholarly split is grounded in the very definition of the sacred and how the sacred relates to the forces (agents) that mediate the sacred and the capacity (agency) of the sacred to act in a given locale. At the risk of oversimplification, as Sonia Hazard reasons, it can be stated that for some researchers, the sacred is a constructed socio-political discourse amongst humans as agents, recurrently studied as cohesive, idealized groups as mediatory forces that allow us to address the agency of the

sacred through the contextualized material world.⁶ Other scholars align with teleological views, looking at the final causes, design, and purpose in the abstract, wherein the material world is acting as an agent and is mediating the ideal, divine agency. In each case, human agency and the locale of the sacred remain present in these scholarly debates. Human agency is examined either through the human body most literally understood or various material objects that reflect the embodiment of human encounters with the holy, while the locale of the sacred is habitually examined through various material forms of framing the sacred space. The various approaches used, however, even if not mutually exclusive, are often conflicting in that they offer different conclusions and hence are rarely simultaneously used and balanced within selected studies. Hence, most studies examine “the sacred” from the perspective of the creation of sacred space, while others turn to the body.

Without going into detailed historiographical overview, from the perspective of sacred space in particular, the core of the division between the positivist and non-positivist studies can be related to Émile Durkheim’s and Mircea Eliade’s⁷ paradigmatic distinction between “the sacred” and “the profane” as a characteristic of all religious beliefs. Their approach was received with some opposition by those who study the holy. Eliade defined the sacred as a transcendent reference to God, positioned the holy in space, time, and cosmology, and explained that the holy becomes accessible to religious people (*homo religiosus*) through the breakthrough experience or the revelation of the sacred, which he termed *hierophany*.⁸ Scholars in various disciplines of religious studies, sociology, anthropology, archeology, art and architectural history engaged with Eliade’s paradigm, addressing the sacred from the perspective of the profane and material world.⁹ The major concern, however, for many

scholars is how Eliade defined the sacred in opposition to the profane and in universal, cosmological terms as “a primordial experience, homologizable to a founding of the world,”¹⁰ and that “the manifestation of the sacred, ontologically founds the world.”¹¹

Eliade’s concept puts human agency as secondary to the absolute and ideal sacred, and allows *homo religiosus* to acquire their true identity only through the participation in the transcendental sacred. In response to the need to contextualize the sacred space as a cultural and social construct, some studies would expand into the nuanced research by Yi-Fu Tuan. By merging social and phenomenological studies, Tuan aims to explain how the abstract, universal space turns into concrete place of the sacred and to contextualize the sacred through human experiences and perceptions.¹² Tuan’s understanding of space as being simultaneously both physical and perceived is enriched by the studies of lived (experienced) space, which can be understood through the actions of those who inhabit and use such spaces.¹³ Medieval scholars have engaged with the notions of lived space and Henri Lefebvre’s thesis that the production of space is a social construct.¹⁴ In turn, their investigations of sacred space often focus on actual architectural framing as the human-constructed signifier of sacred space and understood through the religious rituals that occurred within them.¹⁵ Alexei Lidov proposes *hierotopy* as a deeply ontological approach for studies of sacred spaces and their creation.¹⁶ The *hierotopical* approach in the process of investigation of the sacred does not separate the sacred, as divine presence characterized by divine, non-human will, from the human-created installations that aim to actualize in specific locales of space the memories of *hierophanies*.¹⁷

The scholarly split on the studies of the body can be followed within numerous threads of essentially positivist scholarship and attempts to understand and interpret the role of the

body from within the medieval perspective. The major issue is the question of whether the physical body is separated from soul and mind and whether the body should be studied as matter. The Incarnational event is one of the greatest Christian mysteries when God acquired human form and body, and yet after the Resurrection there was no palpable evidence of Christ's body. Therefore, for a while, in medieval scholarship there prevailed tendencies to focus on the transcendental quality of human presence beyond the corruptible, mortal body. When studied, the body is related to a passive receptacle of the soul and the capacity of the body to receive divine agency (divine grace). In medieval, and in particular Byzantine studies, this trend was most fruitful in the studies of holy icons and holy people (saints).¹⁸ This trend also resulted in studies of the surface of a body as a metaphor of identity and the body of the society.¹⁹ Hence, gender studies or studies of dress and costume correspondingly became prominent in social studies of the medieval body.²⁰

As studies of the body shift to understanding the body as a site of lived experience, aligning with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty,²¹ they include, but are not restricted to, the embodiment.²² Nathan Dennis highlights in his work that, "in a response to the legacy of Marcel Mauss' and Alfred Gell's anthropological models of inanimate agency in human ritual, medieval scholars are increasingly interested in the active agency in human body, material objects that represent the embodiment such as religious icons, and their lived rather than static presence in sacred space."²³ With the introduction of the concept of "spatial icons" by Alexei Lidov as iconic imagery in space or as spatial experience of the sacred, not only the structured space of sacred icons²⁴ but also the totality of sacred space that allows for the interactions

between divine and human agency can be contemplated and perceived via a variety of senses as spatial icons.²⁵

This volume *Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium* addresses a variety of encounters with the sacred in the medieval Mediterranean examined through the perceptions of the body and sacred space. Perception is here defined as the process of viewing and interpreting based on personal as well as cultural information, predicated upon and shaped by conditioned expectations, within a shared visual and conceptual language. The essays in this volume discuss the complex dynamics of perception employed when experiencing what was constructed, represented, and understood as sacred. The comparative studies represented by our collected essays include investigations of human experiences and perceptions of the sacred in specific locations or segments of space with a focus on the relationships between sacred spaces and bodies and the conceptual relationships between religious images, holy persons, and objects within sacred space. The volume thus reassesses multiple, empowering aspects of space, time, and human agency in the medieval Mediterranean. As our research shifts from exploring aspects of holiness, defined as much by viewers as visual presentations, to investigations of human endeavors towards experiential and visual expression that shape and influence perceptions of holiness, the volume ultimately aims at a better understanding of the corporeality of sacred art and architecture and its central role in conveying meanings and ideas fundamental to their production.

Written by philosophers, art and architectural historians, and architects, trained in various schools of thought, this volume gathers eight essays. All of the essays focus on the perceptions of the body and sacred space examined from various perspectives and are grouped

by the primary locale of the sacred they analyze. By starting with the acknowledgment of the immaterial and placeless sacred in cosmological studies of the divine, the first chapter by Filip Ivanović introduces the philosophical understanding of the body and material world in the aesthetics of Dionysius the Areopagite. The choice of examining the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite is deliberate. Dionysius the Areopagite is an early major philosophical reference, which influenced many aspects of medieval culture. Texts by the Areopagite are known to be the least Christological of all influential medieval texts and especially in relation to those later developed under Christological doctrines such as those written by Maximus the Confessor, for example.²⁶ Therefore the opening discussion on the role of body and material, inhabited world within a wider philosophical framework, allows us to assess the formulation and materialization of sacredness in more general terms and to ask how then medieval people in the Mediterranean perceived the sacred through interconnected relationships between the body and sacred space.

Many scholars of medieval religiosity, starting with the perceived stark division between the eternal divine and ephemeral corporeality would emphasize tendencies towards transcendence and spirit at the expense of the matter or would study the body in negative terms.²⁷ Ivanović's study of Dionysius' thought on the participatory beauty of the divine in heavenly and earthly realms reestablishes the relationships between the body and embodiment in the material world and their meanings for medieval Christians in a positive way. Hence, even if not speaking of sacred space nor place directly, the Areopagite texts refer to the inhabited, material world and the heavenly realm that is structured along heavenly orders with bodiless angels, thereby suggesting that the body presupposes physical space. Simultaneously, the

Areopagite thought allows for the discussion of the perceptions of the body and sacred space within the framework of nonnegotiable differences between the material and heavenly realms and the need to examine them together.²⁸

The subsequent chapters probe methodological questions on the perceptions of holiness through selected empirical case studies. The case studies, as a kind of micro-locales of the sacred, focus on specific icons, religious objects, and installations and their settings that reveal human-divine interactions so that the sacred is delivered to the devotees and becomes palpable. Without any commitment to a unified theoretical agenda, each essay then expands the analysis with relevant research framework and textual sources including expansive philosophical and theological thought that can aid in understanding the perception of these objects and their relationships to the body and sacred space. Body is here studied as a body of the believers and devotees, and as the sacred body either embodied in the holy relics and icons or understood more expansively as a liturgical body and transcendental body of the sacred. The locales for sacred spaces are also diverse and range from ecclesiastical settings in churches, baptisteries, or private chapels to those in civic and palatial contexts. In part II, *The Sacred Made Palpable*, three essays examine in particular the perception of the sacred through iconic images of sacred figures and their strategic placement within religious and palatial settings, highlighting the question to what extent these idealized images and especially venerated settings influenced the perception of the human and liturgical body as a vehicle for delivering the sacred to the faithful. A question that emerges from within this in-depth analysis of monumental icons, imperial sacred images, and influences of icons on the perception of the human body is directly related to the question to what extent the animated agency of the icons

can be applied to the animated, living agency of their spatial settings. Four case studies in part III, *The Sacred Delivered*, then address questions on the deliverance of the sacred and ontological references in the wider framework of the corporeality of sacred space and sacred body.

The case studies in this volume are not intended to be comprehensive but a rather detailed and selective overview of the various ways in which medieval Christians encountered the holy with particular investigations into the role of the body and sacred space in the human-divine interactions. The volume also aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly search to find the balance between highly abstract theoretical models about the perceptions of the sacred and important segments of the material culture that include archaeology, art, and architecture. By highlighting the relationships between the body and space, the book also aims to recover the traces and memories of the sacred and give voice to various devotees who were actively engaged in the sacred events.

¹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred. Place, Memory and Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7.

² Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 30-31.

³ Michel de Certeau, "How is Christianity Thinkable Today?" in *Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 135-158, esp. 142.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 30-31.

⁶ On contemporary discussions on agency and agents in religious studies, see, Sonia Hazard, "Agency, the Idea of Agency, and the Problem of Mediation in America's God and Secularism in Antebellum America," *Church History* 84:3 (2015), 610-615.

⁷ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1915), 36-42; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1961), esp. 20-21; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: World, 1958), 1.

⁸ See, Mircea Eliade, "The World, the City, the House," in *Experience of the Sacred. Reading in the Phenomenology of Religion*, ed. S. B. Twiss, W. H. Conser, Jr. (Hanover, London: UPNE, 1992), 188-199. On *hierophany*, see also, Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 6.

⁹ On the role of *homo religiosus* in ancient Mediterranean civilizations, see, for example, J. Ries, A. Motte, N. Spineto, eds., *Les civilisations méditerranéennes et le sacré* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004). Then again, Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton, eds., *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) and Will Coster and Andrew Spicer, *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) base their research around Mircea Eliade's division between the sacred and profane but examine the sacred space as defined from within the private and public domain of secular realms. On the stark division between the sacred and profane and the need to bring them as close as possible when investigating religious societies, see also Alicia Walker and Amanda Luyster, eds., *Negotiating Secular and Sacred in Medieval Art: Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

¹⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, esp. 20-21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001 [1977]).

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), especially chapters "Spatial Architectonics" and "From Absolute Space to Abstract Space;" Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies. Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), especially chapters 1, 2, 5, and 6, and Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell 2014, [1996]).

¹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. See for example, Alain Dierkens and Anne Morelli, eds., *Topographie du sacré: l'emprise religieuse sur l'espace* (Bruxelles: Editions de l'université de Bruxelles, 2008).

¹⁵ See for example, Eric Palazzo, *L'espace rituel et le sacré dans le christianisme: la liturgie de l'autel portatif dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Age* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008); Bonna D. Wescoat and Robert G. Ousterhout, eds., *Architecture of the Sacred Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Alexei Lidov, *Иеротопия: пространственные иконы и образы-парадигмы в византийской культуре* [*Hierotopy: Spatial Icons and Image-Paradigms in Byzantine Culture*] (Moscow: Theoria, 2009); Alexei Lidov, *Hierotopy. Comparative Studies of Sacred Spaces* (Moscow: Indrik, 2009); Alexei Lidov, *Hierotopy. Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (Moscow: Progress-Tradition, 2006).

¹⁷ See, for example, Lidov, *Heirotopy*, 2009, esp. 10-12.

¹⁸ The scholarship on icons is immense. See, for example, Robin Cormack, *Icons* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007); Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Los Angeles: J. P. Getty Museum, 2006); Lilia Evseyeva et al., *A History of Icon Painting: Sources, Traditions, Present Day* (Moscow: Grand-Holding Publishers; UK: Distributor of English ed. Orthodox Christian Books, 2005); Konrad Onasch and Annemarie Schnieper, *Icons. The Fascination and the Reality* (New York: Riverside Book, 1997); Kurt Weitzmann et. al., *The Icon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1992); Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art*, Byzantios 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

¹⁹ Jacques Le Goff, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge* (Paris: L. Levi, 2003); Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, *L'invention du corps: la représentation de l'homme du Moyen Âge à la fin du XIX siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006). See also books by Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons*, and Jean Wirth, *L'image du corps au Moyen Âge* (Firenze: SISMEDEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2013) that examine the homology between the profane and sacred in visual representations of people in icons and portraits.

²⁰ Among recent books, see for example, Thelma K. Thomas et al., *Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Maureen C. Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800-1200* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

²² See the concise summary of the trends in the research of the body in archaeology in Rosemary A. Joyce, "Archaeology of the Body," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* (2005), 139-158.

²³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990); and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1998); Nicoletta Isar, "'Xopós of light': Vision of the Sacred in Paulus the Silentiary's Poem *Descriptio S. Sophiae*," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 28 (2004), 215–242; Glenn Peers, *Sacred Shock: Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010). See also chapter by Dennis in this volume.

²⁴ See, Cécile Voyer and Eric Sparhubert, eds., *L'image médiévale: fonctions dans l'espace sacré et structuration de l'espace cultuel* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

²⁵ On spatial icons see for example, Lidov, *Hierotopy*, 2009, 7.

²⁶ Pascal Mueller-Jourdan, *Typologie spatio-temporelle de l'écclesia byzantine: la Mystagogie de Maxime le Confesseur dans la culture philosophique de l'antiquité tardive* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

²⁷ Jacques Le Goff, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge* (Paris: L. Levi, 2003).

²⁸ In her inspiring work, Patricia Miller Cox, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) even posits that such a positive "material" turn happened between the fourth and seventh centuries.