

The Footprints of the Gods: Supernatural Traces in Christianity, Buddhism and Islam

(Middle Ages – present day)

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The medievalist Caroline Bynum has highlighted the importance of a journey to India in her work on devotions in the Latin West: succumbing “to the tourist’s typical expectation of finding parallels”; she highlights in particular the similarity between stones bearing footprints left by celestial figures in Buddhism and Hinduism and those venerated as the footprints of Christ or the Prophet, notably in Jerusalem (BYNUM 2018). Furthermore, a footprint on ‘Adam’s Peak’ in south-western Sri Lanka is recounted by all these religions, each in its own way: the foot of Buddha, Shiva, the first ancestor in Taoism, and Adam in Islam, and Saint Thomas the Apostle of India in Christianity.

This type of marked stone has long been of interest to folklorists (BORD 2004), but has also prompted extensive research by specialists in Asia, where the phenomenon is widespread (BROWN 2004). It was these specialists who initiated the first cross-cultural approaches, notably at a conference held in Bonn in 2018, which demonstrated the significance of these markings in prehistoric, ancient and medieval contexts (HEGEWALD 2020).

As Caroline Bynum notes, once the confusion of *déjà vu* has been overcome, these similarities invite us to revisit the specific characteristics of each of these devotions, particularly by examining everything that takes place around these images: this is the path taken by Finnbar Barry Flood in his seminal research on the footprints of the Prophet’s sandals, highlighting the importance of ‘technologies of devotion’ (FLOOD 2019). It is following this approach that we propose to continue the transcultural dialogue around these traces. We invite contributors to explore these various issues through specific studies of shrines preserving these traces or collections of images reproducing them, with three main lines of inquiry:

- The devotional practices surrounding these images, including pilgrimages, prayers and the political strategies of devotion. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship with images of feet produced by the faithful themselves in shrines, in the form of votive offerings (DRAYCOTT, 2020; EHMIG *et al.*, 2019) or graffiti (MROZEK ELISZEZYNSKI 2025). Similarly, particular attention will be paid to the question of influences between devotions originating from different cultural areas and traces simultaneously appropriated by several religious groups.

- The discourses and practices of identification, authentication and narration surrounding these traces. Emphasis will be placed on the relationship to the absent body, which makes the trace the quintessential substitute image (BELTING 2011), but also a document, making the trace a particular type of 'epistemic image' (DASTON 2015), and more generally on the relationships between the sacred site, its founding legend and the value of authentication conferred by the imprint.
- The practices of multiplying the trace in all formats, whether the trace is used as an iconographic motif, in life-size representations, or as copies of these devotional images. They raise the classic question of the reproducibility of auratic images (BENJAMIN 2000), but also of the particular power of the image produced by printing, highlighted as a 'resemblance through contact' by Georges Didi-Huberman (2008), and recently discussed within the framework of the European project 'Logic of the Negative' (ed. by Stefano de Bosio, forthcoming volume).

Proposals for papers (in English or French) must be submitted by 31 May 2026 in the form of a provisional title, an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short biography (no more than 100 words), to the following two addresses:

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Selected references:

Hans BELTING, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011.

Janet BORD, *Footprints in Stone: The Significance of Foot- and Hand-prints and Other Imprints Left by Early Men, Giants, Heroes, Devils, Saints, Animals, Ghosts, Witches, Fairies and Monsters*, Loughborough, Heart of Albion Press, 2004.

Kathryn H. Selig BROWN (dir.), *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art*, Katonah, Katonah Museum of Art, 2004.

Caroline Walker BYNUM, « Footprints: The Xenophilia of a European Medievalist », *Common Knowledge*, 24-2, 2018, p. 291-311.

Lorraine DASTON, « Epistemic images », in A. Payne (dir.), *Vision and its Instruments: Art, Science, and Technology in Early Modern Europe*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015, p. 13-35.

Jane DRAYCOTT (dir.), *Bodies of Evidence: Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present and Future*, London, Routledge, 2020.

Ulrike EHMIG, Pierre-Antoine FABRE et Marie-Anne POLO DE BEAULIEU (dir.), *Les ex-voto: objets, usages, traditions. Un regard croisé franco-allemand*, Gutenberg, Computus Druck Satz & verlag, 2019.

Finbarr Barry FLOOD, *Technologies de dévotion dans les arts de l'Islam : pèlerins, reliques et copies*, Paris, Éd. du Louvre, 2019.

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Julia A. B. HEGEWALD, *In the footsteps of the masters: footprints, feet and shoes as objects of veneration in Asian, Islamic and Mediterranean Art*, Berlin, EB-Verlag, 2020.

Giuseppe MROZEK ELISZEZYNSKI (dir.), *Tracciare il passato: i graffiti come fonte per la storia medievale e moderna*, Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2025.