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SWINGING THURIBLES IN EARLY BYZANTINE CHURCHES IN THE HOLY LAND

The swinging of thuribles in which incense is burned to produce a sweet smelling smoke is a familiar scene in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The use of incense in religious worship predates Christianity by thousands of years, and the Old Testament contains numerous references to it. As early as the 4th century AD, literary sources describe the practice of burning incense during church services in the Holy Land. Several bronze thuribles suspended from three chains have been discovered in Early Byzantine churches in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mosaics of contemporaneous churches depict a thurifer holding in his right hand a thurible similar to those found in excavations of churches. There are a few variants in shape but they all consist of a small container, usually made of bronze, three chains, and no lid. Wall paintings in churches at Novgorod show that swinging thuribles without a lid, very similar to those from Early Byzantine churches, continued to be used for many centuries in Russian Orthodox churches.

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Кадилаьницы на цепях в ранневизантийских церквях Святой Земли

Кадилаьницы на цепях, в которых курился приятно пахнувший ладан, — хорошо известный элемент богослужения восточных Православных и Римской Католической Церквей. Однако каждение в богослужении намного старше христианства, и Ветхий Завет неоднократно упоминает этот обычай. Уже в IV в. письменные источники описывают каждение на богослужениях в Святой Земле. Несколько бронзовых кадилаьниц с тремя цепями были найдены в ранневизантийских церквях в восточном Средиземноморье. На мозаиках в храмах того же времени есть изображения кадящих людей с такими же кадилаьницами, какие находят в раскопках. Форма может немного варьироваться, но все эти кадилаьницы представляют собой небольшую коробочку без крышки, с тремя цепями, обычно из бронзы. Новгородские фрески свидетельствуют о том, что кадилаьницы без крышки на цепях, очень похожие на ранневизантийские, продолжали использоваться в течение многих столетий в Русской Православной Церкви.

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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE “GESTURE OF BLESSING” IN THE HELLENISTIC, ROMAN AND BYZANTINE PERIODS IN THE NEAR EAST

The so-called “gesture of blessing” — the raised right hand with the palm turned outward — is open to a number of interpretations, depending on the cultural and religious context in which it occurs. It is very ancient and persists until the present day in the visual arts. When excavating at Dura Europos Franz Cumont described it as the ‘ritual gesture of the ancient Semites’; most scholars refer to the gesture of blessing while others define it as gesture of omnipotence, prayer, reverence, plea and wish for protection. Different interpretations will arise from the archaeological evidence with regard to religion and cult, ethnicity, social status and target group.

The areas I shall focus on are Syria, the Nabatean realm, the Parthian Empire, the Byzantine Empire, Egypt and South Arabia. At first glance, it is primarily the Roman political koine and later