

## The Imagery of Personal Objects: Hints of “Do-It-Yourself” Christian Culture in Merovingian Gaul?

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In her remarkable new synthesis entitled *Europe after Rome. A New Cultural History 500-1000* (Oxford, 2005), Julia Smith offers a useful distinction between, on the one hand, the “compulsory” or “correct” Christianity whose progressive triumph is one of the principal themes of the master narrative of earlier medieval history, and on the other *ad hoc* “do-it-yourself” local Christianities, which she defines as “improvisational forms of Christian living that flourished in ways that made sense to their practitioners but often met with suspicion or outright condemnation from the missionaries who finally caught up with these people” (229-30). To say that the ideal notion of the former dominates the surviving written sources is a considerable understatement: its reiteration by authors like Caesarius of Arles, Boniface or Hrabanus Maurus allows only occasional glimpses of the reality of the latter in the guise of bad examples. And yet, given the centuries it took for “correct” Christianity to triumph—centuries of the “slow seepage of religious change through informal channels of contact in the absence of an organized priesthood” in another of J. Smith’s phrases—this heterogeneous reality must have characterized the religious culture of most Europeans. Is any of this reality recoverable? Archaeology can offer some help.

In Merovingian Gaul “religious” imagery—unmistakably or arguably Christian—sometimes appears on different classes of personal objects worn by their owners in the grave. In Burgundy during the later 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, a remarkable series of plate-buckles with rectangular plates display complex scenes, some well-known, such as Daniel and the Lions, some highly original compositions mixing elements derived from Christian iconography with others plausibly “pagan.” From another group of plate-buckles, these with round buckle-plates, whose geographical focus is Neustria during the same chronological period, some prominently display a cross motif sometimes associated with a staring human face. Do these reflect a “popular” religious imagination operating in the secular world, largely below or beyond the control of the hierarchies? Is the time period, the decades on either side of AD 600, particularly significant for this type of display on personal objects? Is the proliferation of imagery of this type evidence of a deepening christianization of popular culture?