

The project aims to investigate the religiously meaningful bodily expressions of lay Christians in late ancient Egypt (4th-9th c. AD). The research is carried on in the framework of the so-called lived religion and embodied religion approaches. This perspective deliberately puts aside the interest in religious structures and systems and, instead, focuses on the individual. In the case of late ancient Christianity, it means shifting attention from Church organization and theological debates to personal religious imaginary, language and acts of piety. The investigators are deeply concerned about so-called embodied religion which consists of gestures, body positions and distances (proxemics) in the religious acts. Lived religion accepts an individual as the only tangible subject of religious activity, which is always contextual, and the study on the individual as the legitimate starting point for further research. In short, the project assumes that gestures, postures, and spatial movements of the Christian bodies do not have to, and often do not, reproduce the theological and moral norms developed by the institutional Church.

The innovative character of the project is visible in a focus put on the religiosity of the laypeople. While in the research on contemporary religious phenomena it is a standard, in the ancient communities such interest emerged only recently. Although the available sources mainly originated in the ecclesiastical and monastic milieus and touch the issues pertinent to them, there is still enough data to trace the non-clerical and non-monastic Christians.

In sum, the project is concerned about the image of the lay body as presented in the sources and about the manifestations of the Christian identity of laypeople in concrete realisations, such as kneeling, making the sign of the cross, prayer posture, place taken in the Church etc.

To answer these questions, investigators analyse groups of the sources originated in late antique Egypt written in Greek, Coptic and Arabic.

1. Church canons. The canonical collections typical of Egypt (canons of Pseudo-Athanasius, Pseudo-Basil, Pseudo-Hippolytus) give us an opportunity to draw a picture of laypeople as seen from ecclesiastical perspective, what means first of all the transgressions against the ecclesiastical norm.
2. Miracle stories. The collections of miracle narratives about interventions of the Christian saints originated in the shrine dedicated to the cult of a given saint. Their major goal, besides documentation of miracle events, was the promotion of a shrine. They were addressed primarily to the lay audience and since that they describe the typical cultic behaviours of the Christian practitioners. There are four collections of miracles put under scrutiny: of St Means from Abu Mena (preserved in a few versions in Coptic, Greek and Arabic), Sts Cyrus and John from Menuthis, St Phoebammon from Theodosiupolis, and St Kolluthos from Lycopolis.
3. Homilies. In late antique Egypt, the homilies were not freely composed by the preacher but on a regular basis, there were read the pieces ascribed to the renowned Church authorities. Among them, we have a group clearly addressed to the lay audience. Thanks to it, we may recognize the message which the Church authorities communicated to their folk, esp. concept of the Christian body.
4. Documentary texts. As a counterbalance for the abovementioned source corpora, in this case, we have to do with evidence produced by identifiable laymen and laywomen in the daily context. We can see the religious language and needs expressed directly. We may deduce from them how differently particular people manifested their Christian identities.