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## Footprints: The Xenophilia of a European Medievalist

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# FOOTPRINTS

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## The Xenophilia of a European Medievalist

*Caroline Walker Bynum*

As a child, I fantasized about the apparently deserted island of Robinson Crusoe, as did the children of Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, my favorite book.<sup>1</sup> I wandered around my backyard in a circle that I drew in the mud under the swing set to represent my island and pretended that, like those children, I found mysterious footprints. My pretending was emphatically not because I feared or wanted to barricade myself against a threatening and foreign "other"; rather it was because the discovered footprints pointed to something strange and a little out of reach but also recognizable and therefore inviting investigation. Once drawn, the footprints in the mud became my puzzle—as mysterious to me as were the footprints of Man Friday found by Crusoe or the traces of interlopers found by the children of the Swallows camp on their desert island. Of course, I articulated to my eight-year-old self no theory of the footprint. I remember only drawing it and spending hours "exploring my island." But the footprint has remained with me as an image of what, in the context of this symposium, I can call *xenophilia*.

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1. Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* is a classic of children's literature and remains extremely popular. There are radio, TV, and film versions, as well as many reprints.

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A footprint like Man Friday's is not only a trace of something human that has been present; it is, as itself, still present physically. Yet it points beyond, toward something not present any longer—something of which it is, as a modern theorist might say, a trace,<sup>2</sup> or as a medieval theologian would put it, a vestige.<sup>3</sup> Eagerly following such footprints is not the opposite of fear; rather such exploration subsumes fear, impelled by desire for a knowledge that will perhaps be dreadful once even partly obtained. In itself, the footprint stimulates desire (*philia*) and dread (*phobia*). It is, in itself, both absence and presence. And the part (foot) that it makes both present and absent itself signals the existence of a whole (a body) beyond. Thus, the human footprint is the best image I can find for *xenos*: the object of xenophilia. As itself, the footprint is familiar, yet tantalizingly partial, hence strange. But it points beyond itself to something that is foreign, dissimilar, and hence even stranger. I shall return, in closing, to the image of the footprint, exploring meanwhile what such a present yet absent “other” has meant in my more than forty years as a practicing scholar.

If I compare the graduate student I was in the 1960s with the students and younger colleagues I mentor today, I sense that today's students still feel the pull of the exotic or strange. But I also see a telling shift in what the “other” seems to be. When I started graduate school in 1962—in a large cohort of more than forty beginning students (a size inconceivable in these days of reduced job opportunities and guaranteed university funding for graduate students)—most of those who enrolled in the Harvard history department intended to study American or European history.<sup>4</sup> There was, of course, some interest in the rest of the world, but most of the students pursuing such interests were in the various area-studies or language departments. The “outside field” to which we graduate students in history were required to devote a quarter of our qualifying exam was chronologically “other”; I think few of us imagined, however, that it might be non-Western. The “other language” we medievalists planned to learn, once we had Latin and several modern languages under control, was Greek. When I became an assistant professor in the department, my specialty, which was labeled in those days

2. Walter Benjamin conceptualized *trace* as the opposite of *aura*. See his classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1936) and Hansen, “Benjamin's Aura.” Jacques Derrida used the term *trace* for the simulacrum of a presence that invariably refers beyond itself. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 61, and Spivak, “Translator's Preface,” xvii. I have been much influenced by the research and conceptualizations of Brigitte Bedos-Rezak on medieval seals, traces, and identity. I cite here only two examples: “L'empreinte” and *When Ego Was Imago*.

3. The classic citation for a sense of God's footprints (*vestigia*) in creation is Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind to*

*God*. On the medieval and early modern idea of traces of God in the natural world, see generally Ohly, *Zur Signaturenlehre der Frühen Neuzeit*. For a fine interpretation of the significance of footprints as relics, see Cutler, “Relics of Scholarship,” 315–22. Some of my initial ideas about footprints were presented at the conference “Trace(s)/Spur(en)” held at the Freie Universität Berlin from June 29 to July 1, 2016, as part of the program of the Sonderforschungsbereich “Episteme in Bewegung.”

4. What I report here are my memories of my own experiences. Others might give a different picture of the interests and concerns of my cohort.

“medieval intellectual history,” became a kind of default “outside field” for many students studying modern European or American history (perhaps because I was considered to be more accessible than many of the senior professors). What all this suggests is that the Middle Ages was, in those days, as “other” as you got. Graduate student medievalists felt that they were the ones who dared to choose the exotic and bizarre; the Americanists and modern Europeanists who elected some aspect of medieval history as their “outside field” chose it as an “other” to the mainstream narrative of European or Western development that they pursued as their major subject.

The medieval period as “other” was not the Middle Ages we were taught. The senior medievalists in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s—Joseph Strayer, Charles H. Taylor, Gaines Post, Lynn White, Sylvia Thrupp, and Brian Tierney, among others—saw the Middle Ages as the root or origin of valued aspects of modernity: representative government, the “liberties of the Englishman,” and the rule of law; the merchant class, capitalism, and double-entry book-keeping; the university, the liberal arts, and a humanities curriculum based in the classics. We graduate students, no doubt more influenced by the counterculture of the sixties and the Vietnam War protests than we realized, saw and sought something else: not origins or roots but, rather, the challenge of difference. Were there recognizable structures underlying institutions and events as strange as the village “moot,” the theft of saints’ relics, or trial by ordeal? We studied feuding and dispute settlement, the nature of peasant communities, religious revivals, revolts, and heresies—in short, what it meant to belong to or withdraw from groups. My own first work, however inadequately it accomplished what I set out to do, tried to explore what it meant to affiliate with—to choose—the monastery, a male religious community utterly different from anything I had myself experienced.

A glance at what Harvard graduate students were reading that was supplementary to the tomes assigned by senior professors underscores both the ways in which we medievalist students departed from some of the narrative enshrined in the prescribed curriculum and the ways in which we differed from our fellow graduate students in history departments. It was we medievalists who were the first among American graduate students of the 1960s to read Victor Turner, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, Marcel Mauss, Max Gluckman, and Clifford Geertz. Anthropology was our escape from the recommended reading list of Étienne Gilson, Frederic W. Maitland, Robert Fawtier, Jean-François Lemarignier, R. W. Southern, and Jean Leclercq. Whereas the Americanists and modern Europeanists were responding (often with hostility) to Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s quantitatively based study *Time on the Cross* and attempting to “go their professors one better” by analyzing hard data with the recently invented punch cards that were a forerunner of the computer, we medievalists

were branching out beyond the recognized list of classics in the medieval field by reading about Africa and Polynesia. Of course, the remarkable Annales School pointed us in this direction. Marc Bloch had told us that we could not plow with charters rather than plowshares. Moreover, Peter Brown's magisterial biography of Augustine of Hippo and, a bit later, Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* provided models for the use of anthropological insights whose lessons we absorbed.<sup>5</sup> We were not as revolutionary or as innovative as we thought. Graduate students never are. Nonetheless, we felt that we were a vanguard of alterity.

The "other" we wanted to study was not, I would emphasize, what some critics came, by the 1990s, to see in the Middle Ages: a culture of the bizarre.<sup>6</sup> Our debates were not so much about the peculiar and the piquant—the stuff of which "The Society for Creative Anachronism" made pageants—as about how far one should or could go with the sort of structural analysis found in the anthropology we were reading. Yes, as some have observed, ghosts and mermaids, vampires and shape-changing, the *jus primae noctis* and gender-bending did come into it, but we were, in those early years, far more interested in the nature of ritual itself, in how one might extract from legal and theological texts information about basic social structures, and in the gap between, as well as the relationship of, evidence and experience. We found the medieval period useful for such questioning exactly because it was so different from the twentieth-century world we inhabited; it was, for us, not the origin of the modern world but a test case of otherness. That way of studying the Middle Ages was, I would suggest, an expression of xenophilia.

Today the European Middle Ages is no longer "as other as it gets." There are a number of reasons for this, some of them having to do with the wider culture we inhabit and some with how medievalists themselves have understood and advertised their field. No matter how negative current stereotypes of the medieval period are—and "I'm going to get medieval on you" as a threat of personal violence and retaliation is only the most egregious example of negative stereotyping of the period—today's viewers of television, movies, computer games, and the Internet certainly think they know the Middle Ages. Often understood as a hodgepodge of Tolkien, Anne Rice's vampires, King Arthur's round table, and *Game of Thrones*, the medieval period seems familiarly horrible.

Medievalists themselves have tried to make a virtue of such familiarity by creating college courses on "medievalism." These can include histories of ideas about the Middle Ages in subsequent periods (in, for example, the Gothic

5. Bloch, *French Rural History*, first published 1931. Bloch, of course, also knew the dangers of assuming that nothing changes in agricultural or village life and of arguing from present to past. See also Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, and Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. By the time Thomas's volume appeared, I was an assistant professor,

but his arguments were known earlier through the work of, among others, Allan MacFarlane.

6. See Freedman and Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New."

Revival, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Oxford Movement), tours through modern fantasy literature (the favorite here seems to be *The Lord of the Rings*), surveys of movies about the Middle Ages (such as *Braveheart*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and various treatments of Joan of Arc), and even courses with titles such as “Medieval Seattle” (which seeks out Romanesque arches in buildings adjacent to the Pike Place Market).<sup>7</sup> Although instructors often voice the hope that the broad appeal of such courses will draw students into advanced study of the period between c. 500 and c. 1500 or justify the retention in hiring budgets of a medievalist when a specialist in the period retires, such results are so far unproven. In any case, such a Middle Ages is not likely to be sufficiently “other” to satisfy an undergraduate student body that is now far more diverse in race, class, gender, and self-understanding than my graduate cohort of the 1960s or the undergraduates I taught in the early 1970s. Those who watch programs about the Crusades as a colonial enterprise on the History Channel or fulfill college distribution requirements with a course that questions whether the virginity of late medieval nuns was repression or liberation tend to meet in such encounters the worries and certainties of their modern selves. There is nothing particularly “other” about the fey, or the shocking, or the horrid.

In the history teaching and mentoring I have done recently, I have found that some of the best aspiring medievalists want a different “other.” The language they plan to learn once they have mastered Latin is Arabic or Hebrew, or even Sanskrit or Tamil, rather than Greek, and they intend to take the time to learn it. Their Middle Ages reaches into the Mediterranean and beyond to the Indian Ocean, or to the Wends and Slavs in Eastern Europe, into the Baltic, or across the Vistula.<sup>8</sup> The easier access to manuscripts and archives made possible by micro-filming projects such as the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library has produced not armchair scholars who stay at home and wait for document delivery, but rather explorers who travel to see the manuscripts themselves, aware that in some cases marginalia are available only to careful scrutiny of the physical object. In the best of the current search for “the other,” students often turn to objects to destabilize reliance on texts—not only to books as things but also to pots and door knockers, to the furnishings of bedrooms and cloisters.<sup>9</sup> Without either romanticizing

7. On the recent interest in “medievalism,” see D’Arcens, *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*; Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*; and the journals *postmedieval*, [www.siu.edu/~ejoy/postmedievalProspectus.htm](http://www.siu.edu/~ejoy/postmedievalProspectus.htm), and *Studies in Medievalism*, [www.medievalism.net/sim.html](http://www.medievalism.net/sim.html). The nexus between reenactment and study of the Middle Ages is explicit in the website for *Studies in Medievalism*, which states that it is “dedicated to the study of post-medieval images and perceptions of the Middle Ages . . . with particular interest in the interaction between scholarship and re-creation.” See also [www.medievalhistories.com/public-medievalist/](http://www.medievalhistories.com/public-medievalist/), a website and blog on the Middle Ages in public history; accessed July 15, 2017.

8. For example, Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*; Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World*; and Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean*.

9. For some examples, see Weinryb, *Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*; Bartal, Bodner, and Kühnel, *Natural Materials of the Holy Land*; Bynum, *Christian Materiality*; and Smith, “Portable Christianity,” 143–67.

this “other” or minimizing how difficult it is to study well such new subjects and contexts, I nonetheless point out that, to many of today’s medievalists, xenophilia means a turn to the non-Western as opposed to the European and to the material in contrast to (or in addition to) the textual.

While hardly in the vanguard of this move among medievalists toward a non-Western and/or material other, I too have turned to study that might be characterized as xenophilia. Stimulated as much by the beauty of David Shulman’s prose describing the Telugu language as by a long-standing interest in the poetry of Mirabai, I traveled to India in 2009.<sup>10</sup> Although I should have known better, I succumbed before going to the typical tourist’s expectation of finding parallels. And find parallels I did. Exactly like the most egregious, familiarizing courses on the Middle Ages that I have criticized here, I found in reading about extreme Hindu nationalism and the slaughter of 2002 in Gujarat parallels to Western events ranging from the anti-Jewish pogroms in the Rhineland of 1096 to the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943.<sup>11</sup> My reading about and then encounter with the slums of Mumbai suggested to me the filthy streets of medieval Paris and the worst of the contemporary Bronx.<sup>12</sup> Meeting a feudal lord in rural Andhra Pradesh, who sequestered his women in purdah (although I, as a foreigner accompanied by a learned anthropologist, was allowed to eat with him) suggested an insight into the brute power of European lordship. The gorgeous carving on the temples of Bhubaneswar seemed to flow over me, stunning me with the same sort of wild joy I had experienced before only in viewing the Romanesque tympana of Burgundy.

We have all, I think, laughed at tourists whose first reaction to encounter with the strange and new is to say, “Oh that’s like \_\_\_\_ back in Des Moines, or at home in Manchester or \_\_\_\_” (fill in the blanks). But we have all sometimes reacted thus. How else can we begin to understand what is genuinely different? Such perceiving (usually misperceiving) of parallels is more assimilation than xenophilia. Even in this reaction, however, I did learn from my trip to India, stumbling forward to greater understanding. Guided by the anthropologist Sashi Sekhar and the political scientist Jyotirmaya Sharma, I learned that scholars of India, like Europeanists, have turned to archaeology and material culture to provide new evidence for cultural change. With Dr. Sekhar, I visited Buddhist caves where I saw that the material remains of early monasteries show a mixing of Buddhist and Hindu elements that the written historical record obscures. Moreover,

10. Shulman, *Spring, Heat, Rains*. I was introduced to Mirabai as long ago as 1985, when I edited (along with my colleagues Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman) the collection *Gender and Religion*, which included a fascinating article by J. S. Hawley: “Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna.” For more recent discussion, I am indebted to Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*.

11. Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*.

12. See, more recently, Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*.



I came increasingly to see parallels between European and Asian developments that were far more complex than one-to-one identifications. Rather than merely finding a parallel between Hindu polytheism and the medieval Christian saints' cult (which some have thought to be an absorption of earlier pagan gods and goddesses or an expression of a universal need to reify human characteristics), I saw more clearly than before that a multiplicity of sacred persons involves the lodging of contradiction in the divine. Drawing parallels between the devotional poetry associated with the sixteenth-century female Hindu saint Mirabai and the writings of Western Christian mystical women such as Hadewijch and Margaret Porete helped me to understand more fully how the possibility of using forms of vernacular love poetry can enable women's voices to emerge.<sup>13</sup> I also came to see at a deeper level than before the ways in which Hindu *bhakti* (personal and affective devotion) and the affective piety of medieval Europe arose, although not in synchronicity, in contexts where a specialized religious class—the Brahmin caste, on the one hand, and an institutionalized Christian clergy, on the other—had earlier seemed to monopolize cult. Increasingly complex economic and social developments gave new social groups (Kshatriyas in India and the urban bourgeoisie in Europe) new opportunities for personal religious expression.

As I traveled in India and considered afterward what I had learned, I found, however, something conceptually deeper than the parallels that first piqued my attention, even as the parallels themselves deepened and changed. Fundamental incongruities emerged. I found myself probing, as I think we anthropological medievalists of the 1960s and 1970s had tried to probe, for structures that lay behind the apparent congruences or “look-alikes” between medieval Europe and medieval or modern India that first surface in an observer's mind. It is this kind of probing that seems to me a true xenophilia: a desire for and love of the other that retains a sense of the threat it offers to our own perceptions exactly because it does not fit them, does not reinforce them, does not allow us to rest with an easy, or even an uneasy, similarity.

In October, 2009, I attended the ten-day festival of Durga Puja (the word *puja* means “the ritual of worship”) in Varanasi. Beginning with the preparation of special foods and the setting up of booths for holiday goods, the festival involves the construction of images of the many-armed goddess Durga out of river clay

13. The question of Mirabai's voice is, of course, complicated since we have only one poem that can be reliably dated to her century, the sixteenth, although (according to J. S. Hawley) the poems attributed to her are less “artful” in structure than those attributed to the men in her *bhakti* family. See Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*. There have been questions raised as well about how far the Christian female writers Margaret Porete and even Hadewijch were the “authors” of their own works—questions ranging from

feminist postmodernist queries about whether all “female” voices are a kind of ventriloquism of the male to complex explorations of textual transmission. See, among many works that might be cited, Mooney, *Gendered Voices*. It is worth noting also that, for both *bhakti* poets and Christian women in the later Middle Ages, much of what survives circulated as excerpts either anonymously or under male attributions. See, for example, Poor, *Mechtilde of Magdeburg and Her Book*.



by artisans in special rites. The figures are then adorned with paint, clothes, and jewels and worshipped with dance, flowers, and song in the temporary temples or “pandals” made for them and found on hundreds of street corners for days before the final ritual procession.<sup>14</sup> On the last night, I followed Durga, warrior against the buffalo-demon, as she was carried through the streets on litters borne on the backs of men or on flatbed trucks. Music, often from boomboxes, blared; faces were focused so intently on the goddess herself that, although squeezed in among thousands of men (and they were mostly men), I felt not so much out of place as invisible.<sup>15</sup> Then, on a flat boat on the Ganga, surrounded by hundreds of other boats and floating candles, I watched as Durga, made from the clay of the river, was thrown into the sacred waters. When I journeyed the next day on the Ganga, I saw plasticized body parts, bits of gauzy clothing, bright faces, and fingernails floating and disintegrating in the river. The goddess had returned to the organic world from which she arose.

It was impossible that such processions not remind me of the processions of female saints, especially the Virgin Mary, that I had seen in Boston’s North End in my graduate student days and that many other scholars, such as, for example, Robert Orsi in his classic study *The Madonna of 115th Street*, have explored.<sup>16</sup> There are even contemporary cases in the West in which female saints go to the water, such as the feast of the Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the Camargue, in the south of France, described by Cynthia Hahn in her book *Strange Beauty*.<sup>17</sup> In this autumnal festival, two large carved and painted female figures in a small boat are carried from the church where they usually reside, above and behind the main altar, to a nearby beach and are held above the waves, after which, escorted by the crowd of worshippers, they are returned to the church. The festival commemorates the miraculous arrival from the Holy Land, in a boat without sail or oars, of the saints Mary Jacobus and Mary Salome, relatives of the Virgin Mary, who were supposedly present with her at the crucifixion of Christ.

There are many striking similarities between Durga and the Virgin of Boston’s North End or of New York’s 115th Street, including the fact that both Durga and Mary are particular to their moment and place but also simultaneously the universal goddess and/or saint. In a way of thinking sometimes characterized

14. See McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing*, 1–5, for the process of the awakening of the goddess. Shulman, *Spring, Heat, Rains*, 78, 93, 97, and Hess, “An Open-Air Ramayana,” give other examples of Hindu festivals, such as the Durga Puja that I attended, in which the goddess figure returns to the organic world from which she arose.

15. McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing*, 197–99, points out that Puja festivals have traditionally been male-dominated, although the celebrations appeal to both sexes.

16. The procession of the Madonna delle Grazie through Boston’s North End on July 8, 2012, is only one example of Mary’s enthusiastic adherents and her costly adornments. See [northendwaterfront.com/2012/07/madonna-delle-grazie-2012-procession-through-bostons-north-end-photos/](http://northendwaterfront.com/2012/07/madonna-delle-grazie-2012-procession-through-bostons-north-end-photos/), accessed July 3, 2017. For another case, see [northendwaterfront.com/2012/08/madonna-della-cava-2012-feast-sunday-procession-photos/](http://northendwaterfront.com/2012/08/madonna-della-cava-2012-feast-sunday-procession-photos/), accessed July 3, 2017. See also Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street*, and Sciorra, “We Go Where the Italians Live.”

17. Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 145–47.

by scholars of religion as “the devotional logic of presence,” each Durga or Mary is local, possessing specific characteristics, yet each is also *the* goddess Mary or Durga, in whom the full power of the original inheres.<sup>18</sup>

My trip on the Ganga the morning after Durga Puja made one fundamental difference immediately clear, however: the Marys leave their churches and return to them. Even Mary Jacobus and Mary Salome in the Camargue, whose miraculous arrival by water is celebrated hundreds of years later, merely visit the ocean before returning to their niche over the altar. One cannot imagine throwing the Madonna of Mount Carmel into the Hudson River or the two Marys of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer into the ocean. Although the Madonnas of Catholic worship represent a paradox of fertility and purity (as simultaneously mother and virgin), they do not come from or return to mud as Durga does.<sup>19</sup> Behind the apparent similarity of female divines, and the similar responses to them in ritual and procession, lies a fundamentally different understanding of the manifestation of the sacred in the natural world.<sup>20</sup>

As I thought about these similarities and differences after my return from India, I found help in the concept of pseudomorphism that my colleague at the Institute for Advanced Study, Yve-Alain Bois, was exploring—a concept rooted in sophisticated anthropological and art historical theorizing. Puzzling about why objects in different cultures appear to be strikingly the same in basic structure without deriving from the same origin had, over the past half-century, engaged scholars as influential as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Erwin Panofsky.<sup>21</sup> The tentative answers they proposed struck me as less important than the posing of the question. It seemed to me that what they identified was a “tyranny of morphology” (in Christopher Heuer’s felicitous phrase) that had too long obtained in the study of religion: a tendency, that is, to assume that comparative study should be the study of “look-alikes.” If one found female god figures in different cultures,

18. The hundreds of Durgas in Varanasi and the Marys in Boston, New York, or Provence is each fully a holy presence, although usually not in a generalized way. The Marys are specific Marys (the Mary of Mount Carmel or the Madonna delle Grazie of Boston’s North End)—instantiations of specific appearances of Our Lady more than of Mary herself—just as Indian temple statues are often not so much Ganesha or Hanuman, for example, as a specific aspect of Ganesha or Hanuman, tied to a particular geographical place. Both Durga in Varanasi and Our Lady of Mount Carmel in New York are examples of the complex way in which part is whole in many religions, to which a technical phrase, “the distinctive devotional logic of presence,” may be applied (likewise a phrase of my own: the “concomitant habit of mind”). One must be careful not to push analytical categories too hard in asking “who is there?” Some of the participants in Catholic festivals would say that Mary herself is present; others would

insist that this Mary is their particular Mary and that other places have other Marys. See Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street*, xvi, and Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 208–15.

19. There are, of course, Hindu temple gods and goddesses that are not constructed from river clay and that return after procession to their temple home.

20. It is worth noting, as J. S. Hawley has pointed out to me, that in Hinduism, the earth itself—*vasu*—is a goddess.

21. See Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 26–27, and Lévi-Strauss, “Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America.” See also Powell, *Depositions*, 10–11. The point of the false similarity, as Powell sees it, is to stimulate the interpreter to ask new questions by decontextualizing the objects. To Panofsky and Lévi-Strauss, the point is to ask why the parallels or analogies occur.

one compared feminine divines; if one found attention to the male genitals (as in, for example, the case of the Shiva linga), one compared male bodies. Yet, as I discovered, Durga is not really very much like the Virgin Mary, nor is the Shiva linga like Michelangelo's *David*, with or without his fig leaf. True comparison must go beneath ritual parallels and morphological similarities. It must probe to the possibility that different attitudes may underlie apparently similar shapes and acts and that radically differing figures and rituals might express similar fundamental needs. Without exploring this point further here, I should add that, after returning from India, I wrote a long article using such ideas to struggle with the question of proper and improper comparison.<sup>22</sup> The sort of comparing I advocate in that essay—a comparing that goes beneath apparent similarities and parallels to find where radically differing figures and rituals may provide the closest and deepest similarities in structure and function across cultures—is what I mean by true xenophilia. To love and yearn for an “other” must, in my judgment, be to yearn for it in all its challenging and poignant difference. Xenophilia is not assimilation, nor should it ever result in resting with the often pseudosimilarities of appearance.<sup>23</sup>

In the decade since returning from India, I have moved increasingly to the study of European medieval devotional objects that parallel the god and goddess statues I saw in India.<sup>24</sup> Working recently on the clothing of statues and the use of other household objects, such as miniature cradles, by late medieval religious women, I have been interested in the ways in which devotional articles, like (or perhaps even more than) devotional texts, refer to both the earthly and the heavenly.<sup>25</sup> The wreaths with which medieval nuns crowned themselves and their statues identify them with the Virgin Mother of God and yet the very shape of these cap-like circlets makes it clear that the nun has not in this life achieved a crown like that of Mary. The manger found in late medieval crèches is throne, altar, and sarcophagus as well as bed; it refers to the heart, womb, and bowels of the devotee as well as imaging the heavenly place where God reigns or the altar where transubstantiation happens. Things used in religious ritual and meditation point toward the “other” of heaven; yet, paradoxically, they also are ordinary articles of earthly life. They allow the sacred to be both away and here, both frightening in its power and yet accessible in its materiality. Indeed, one might suggest that xenophilia is, for the religious person, a description of the yearning for an “other” that, for Hindu as well as Christian, is always just a little bit beyond.

One of the objects in which I have been interested recently is the footprint,

22. Bynum, “Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology.” In my discussion here, I borrow a few sentences from this article.

23. This is not to argue against all cultural appropriation. I do not wish to delve here into that issue, much discussed recently. I merely want to assert that appropriation is not xenophilia because it tends to erase “otherness.”

24. Bynum, *Christian Materiality*. For other examples of the recent “material turn” in medieval and early modern studies, see Rublack, “Matter in the Material Renaissance”; Bartal, Bodner, and Kühnel, *Natural Materials of the Holy Land*; and Findlen, *Early Modern Things*.

25. Bynum, “Crowned with Many Crowns” and “Encounter: Holy Beds.”

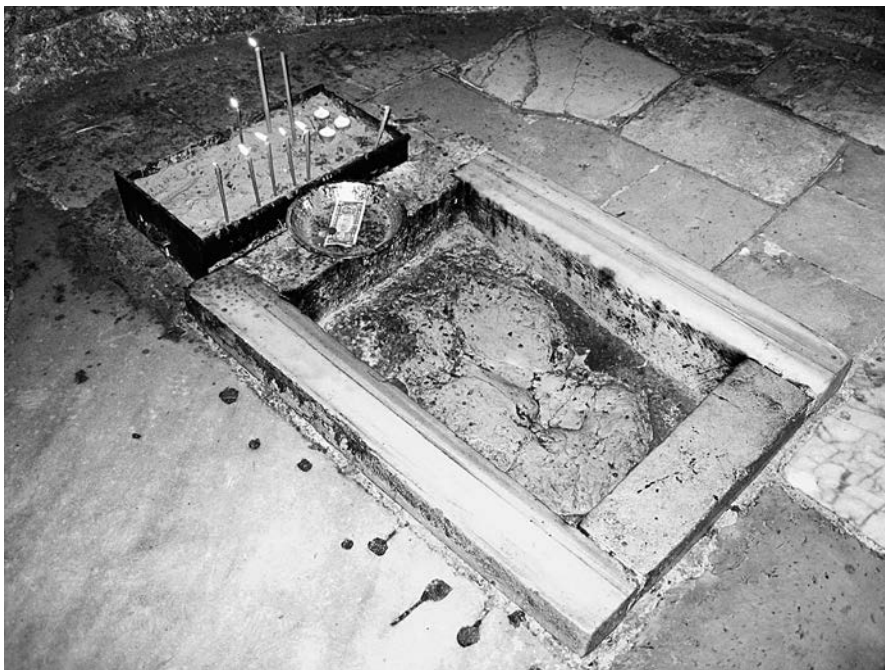


Figure 1. Christ's footprint on the Mount of Olives in a contemporary photograph. The supposed footprint is in the center between the two larger marble pieces. Credit: Wikipedia

especially the footprint of Jesus on the Mount of Olives in the Holy Land and the ways in which it traveled to medieval Europe (Fig. 1). The footprint is a wonderful subject for thinking about the question of cross-cultural comparison that my trip to India forced me to address. The popular book *Footprints in Stone* by Janet Bord, published in 2004, details hundreds of supposed imprints of the feet of giants, heroes, saints, devils, monsters, gods, and goddesses in places all over the globe.<sup>26</sup> At the most obvious level of consideration, such stone impressions or marks show how the same object can be differently interpreted in different cultures. For example, the almost six-foot-long footprint on Adam's Peak in southwest Sri Lanka is interpreted by Muslims as the place where Adam landed when he was expelled from paradise. To Buddhists, it is the footprint left by the Buddha at the moment of his final contact with the world from which he was departing. To some Hindus, it is the print of Shiva; to Chinese Daoists, that of the first ancestor. Christians claim that the mark was left by St. Thomas, apostle to south India.<sup>27</sup>

26. Bord, *Footprints*. See also Kinnard, *Places in Motion*, chap. 3: "The Polyvalent Pādas of Viṣṇu and Buddha," 56–98. Feet are significant in many religions; often the gods or their avatars and servants are not permitted to touch the earth, which is seen as polluting. See Kinnard, *Places in Motion*, and Thomas, "Riddle of Ishtar's Shoes," 303–19. Footwashing is often a purification ritual. See Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 91.

27. Bord, *Footprints*, 36, 50, 89, and 196. Kinnard, *Places in Motion*, chap. 3, considers sculptural images of footprints in Bihar that are revered by both Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims, who attach very different identities and significance to the same objects. Kinnard argues that the issue of to whom the footprints belong does not arise among worshippers because identity is fluid, depending on the context within which a footprint is located and the religious identity of the participant.

Even the footprints of Christ on the Mount of Olives, understood by both Christians and Muslims to have been made by the same figure, make the question of morphological identity or similarity more complicated when we consider their materiality.<sup>28</sup> Our early accounts describe the footprints as dust or sand that remains miraculously undisturbed despite the fact that pilgrims take away particles.<sup>29</sup> After the siege of Jerusalem in 1099, descriptions refer to a “stone footprint,” sometimes a left footprint, sometimes a right.<sup>30</sup> What is important for my purposes is the claim that the footprint remains the footprint even when what it is made of changes. Moreover, we have examples of tracings of it (that is, outlines of its shape made to its exact measure and touched to it) that were carried home to Europe from the Holy Land by pilgrims as a means of transporting its power. In such cases, we might say that shape (morphology) both determines what the thing is and enables it to be, or to transmit, the power of the original.<sup>31</sup>

But in keeping with my argument that comparison should go deeper than merely charting differing interpretations of “look-alikes,” we need to consider these footprints again. Although the footprint was sometimes conveyed by an outline or form that imaged it exactly, the object was also sometimes conveyed by a particle of sand or dust that looked nothing like the shape of Christ’s foot from which it was taken. Our earliest account, that by Sulpicius Severus, suggests that “the sand of the place suffers no injury . . . as if it had been sealed by the footprints impressed upon it.”<sup>32</sup> As the modern historian Ora Limor puts it, the earth had a will of its own; it preferred to stay shaped just as Christ had made

28. For the supposed footprint as it appears today, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapel\\_of\\_the\\_Ascension\\_\(Jerusalem\)#/media/File:5029-20080122-jerusalem-mt-olives-ascension-rock.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapel_of_the_Ascension_(Jerusalem)#/media/File:5029-20080122-jerusalem-mt-olives-ascension-rock.jpg) (accessed July 2, 2017) and, herein, Fig. 1.

29. Veneration of Christ’s footprints in the church on the Mount of Olives is first mentioned in the early fifth century in a letter that Bishop Paulinus of Nola (died 431) wrote to his friend Sulpicius Severus (based not on eye-witness experience but on reports from someone living in Jerusalem). According to this account, the footprints could not be covered in marble but sprang into view again when workmen attempted to cover them. See Paulinus of Nola, Epistle 31, para. 4, in *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, vol. 61, col. 328. On this report, Sulpicius based the account in the second book of his chronicle of 402, asserting that the footprints remained undisturbed even though pilgrims continuously took particles of earth with them from the holy place. Sulpicius Severus, *Chronica*, bk. 2, sec. 33, *La Chronique de Sulpice Sévère*, vol. 2, 75–76. In the thirteenth century, James of Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, one of the two or three most widely read books in the later Middle Ages, repeated Sulpicius’s account, stressing that the footprints refused to be cov-

ered over with marble and underlining their permanence as proof of Christ’s presence on earth after the Resurrection. De Voragine, *Golden Legend*, vol. 1, 292, and see Cutler, “Relics of Scholarship,” 315–22.

30. The first explicit reference to a stone imprinted with feet seems to have been written by a pilgrim from Iceland in about 1150. See Wilkinson et al., *Jerusalem Pilgrimage*, 221–22, and Pringle, *Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, 73, 401.

31. The efficacy of such objects lies not just in their looking like the original but also in their physical contact with it—a point needing more attention than I can give it here. For an example of a pilgrim’s token, in linen, from about 1600, cut to the exact shape and size of the footprint and touched to it, see Bord, *Footprints*, 38. The complex ways in which Christ’s footprints were transported is sometimes called the “contagion of holiness” or the “devotional logic of presence.” See Bord, *Footprints*, 6–7, and n. 18 above. The question of how far physical contact with an original is necessary for a replica, outline, or measurement to carry power arises also with the Buddhist footprints referred to in n. 41 below.

32. For Sulpicius, see n. 29 above.



it, to look like the outline of Christ's foot.<sup>33</sup> But the bits that pilgrims took away were easily acquired and did not look like the print at all. They conveyed presence and power in another form. Augustine wrote in the *City of God* about a certain Hesperius who received a bit of sacred earth from Jerusalem and hung it in his bedroom where it warded off demons. The earth was later buried and became the site of miraculous cures. A tiny particle that *was* the stuff in question, not its shape or "look-alike," transported power from Jerusalem to a bedroom near Hippo and beyond that to a burial site.<sup>34</sup> Later relic collections in Europe claimed to include small bits of the stone on which Jesus stood when he ascended into the sky.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the footprints were active, self-replicating, transportable power not only in bits of themselves but also as measures that replicated not their appearance but their length. An anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza in about 570 describes pilgrims taking a measure of the prints (*vestigia*) of Christ's feet from where he stood before Pilate, hanging these measures around themselves and receiving "cures of various diseases."<sup>36</sup> An Icelandic pilgrim in about 1150 referred to "the stone that the Lord stepped on when he ascended to the heavens, and one can see the imprint of his left foot, fourteen inches long, as if he has stepped barefoot into clay."<sup>37</sup> To this pilgrim, the exact measurement *was* the print. We have many examples from the later Middle Ages of measures of Christ's body and body parts—parts that were left as prints in columns or rocks—standing in for, indeed *being*, the power of Christ, transported across time and space.<sup>38</sup> Such physical measurements are made possible by the absence of the departed and yet carry the immediacy of his power—a power that inheres in them. It is my sense that all religious objects (and perhaps also cultural objects in general) point, like these measures, toward "other" as well as self—that they signify both absence and presence.<sup>39</sup>

33. I rely here on Bartal, Bodner, and Kühnel, *Natural Materials of the Holy Land*, particularly the introduction and the chapters by Limor ("Earth, Stone, Water, and Oil," 3–18) and Donkin ("Earth from Elsewhere," 109–26). See esp. Limor, 8.

34. Augustine, *City of God*, 824, cited in Limor, "Earth, Stone, Water, and Oil," 7.

35. The inventory of a twelfth-century reliquary of the head of Pope Alexander III now in Brussels lists "a relic of the stone on which the Lord stood when he ascended into the sky." A relic capsule from the capital of a column in the cathedral at Braunschweig supposedly includes a bit of the stone "from which the Lord ascended to heaven." For both examples, see Worm, "Steine und Fusspuren Christi auf dem Ölberg," 310–11n41.

36. See "Antonini Placentini Itinerarium," sec. 23, in *Itinera Hierosolymitana, Saec. IV–VIII*, 175. Sec. 22, 174, refers to measures (*mensurae*) of Christ's breast and hands taken from the column of the flagellation.

37. See n. 30 above for the Icelandic pilgrim.

38. See Areford, "Passion Measured," and Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 94–99, 110, 319n86, and 320n89.

39. Much more could be said about feet as religiously significant than I can do here; see n. 26 above. Medieval exegetes read the head of Christ as symbolizing his divinity and the feet his humanity. See Deshman, "Another Look at the Disappearing Christ," 528–30. Christ's washing the feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday (Matt. 26:14–39; Luke 22:24–27; John 13:1–17) underlined not only his humility but also his physicality, his contact with soil and earth. The many medieval depictions of the most prominent saints of Christendom (above all, Mary Magdalen and Francis of Assisi) curled around the feet of Christ in devotion suggest that feet were a special place of encounter with the physicality of the holy. For the association of the Magdalen with the feet of Christ, see Deshman, "Another Look at the Disappearing Christ," 537. We should also note that the feet of medieval devotional figures were especially stroked and adored, some until they were almost worn away. On the worn feet of devotional objects, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, fig. 1, p. 23.

Modern theorists rightly claim that the trace or print owes its existence to an entity that is always already gone.<sup>40</sup> A footprint gestures toward something that cannot be present; if the foot were there, we would not see the footprint. The same may be said of the case of mechanical reproduction. When a seal is imprinted in wax, an object formed in a mold, or a print made from an engraved metal plate, the mold or matrix or plate must be removed in order for the copy to exist. Absence is the condition of presence; the reproduction or trace exists only when the modeling object is gone. And in the case of the footprint, the object that informs the material it shapes is itself a part (foot) that signals a whole (body). Hence the footprint is *pars pro toto* in two senses: print implies (absent) foot, which implies (absent) body.

It is clear that absence—not vanishing or ephemerality but absence—is at the heart of early Christianity. Indeed, Christianity can be said to have been established, authenticated, even proven by an absence: the empty tomb. The non-presence of a dead body at a specific site demonstrated the Resurrection: “he [Jesus] is not here but is risen” (Luke 24:6). Similarly, the footprints on the Mount of Olives proved the Ascension: he was here—a real human with real feet—but now he has gone up into heaven (Acts 1:2–12).

Nonetheless, as my discussion of the medieval veneration of Christ’s footprints indicates, medieval traces were presences as well as absences. Christ’s footprints in Jerusalem not only referred to a pattern or charismatic person that had gone away; they were in themselves a substance, a holiness, a power that was present. Not remembrances or mnemonic devices, they were proofs and loci of power. Those who viewed or touched them experienced something insistently and permanently there. Not only enduring, they also replicated themselves; as bits, as outlines, or as measures, they acted.<sup>41</sup> Although parts, they made present the whole body of the God-man. Moreover, this understanding of presence in absence, whole in part, permeated medieval piety. Bits (relics) of the saints, even material that had been in contact with them, made the whole saint present at altar or shrine, although he or she was simultaneously before the throne of God in heaven. Devotees who spoke of their hearts as empty cradles or beds or houses or wombs, waiting to receive the Lord in flesh or vision, were playing with complex ideas of lack or absence as the condition for, the evocation of, indeed the guarantee of presence, epiphany, arrival.

Iconographic evidence makes vivid the way in which the footprint of medieval devotion is both presence and absence. According to the art historian Andrea Worm, the earliest visual representations of Christ rising up from what is clearly

40. See notes 2 and 3 above.

41. The footprints often found in Buddhist art also themselves act. See Brown, *Eternal Presence*. In order to use the footprint as a model for what we study in studying the

“other,” this aspect of the footprint as active and productive is a crucial component. Although in this article I characterize that conception as medieval Christian, it is important to note that it is equally important in other religions.





Figure 2. "The Ascension of Christ," from the *Horologium devotionis*, fol. 92v, woodcut, German, 1489. Some such woodcuts show one footprint and some show two, but all emphasize the space between the departing feet and the footprints that remain. From *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 87: *German Book Illustration Before 1500: Anonymous Artists, 1489–91*, p. 116, #1489/393 [4.2780]. Credit: Abaris Books

a stone on the Mount of Olives is a manuscript now in the British Library, probably from Trier and produced around 1100.<sup>42</sup> There are a number of twelfth- and thirteenth-century examples of such stones, which sometimes resemble plaques or altars, although many depictions show Christ departing from a hillock or mountain, not a stone. By the mid-twelfth century, we also find illustrations in which Christ leaves behind either one or two footprints, usually directly on a hillock, although there are a few examples that combine the stone and the footprints.<sup>43</sup> In a number of cases, the depiction of Christ as vanishing upward, so that only his feet remain visible, is combined with the presence of the footprints (Fig. 2).<sup>44</sup> (The fifteenth-century woodcut in Fig. 2 is typical of many devotional images from northern Europe.) Although it used to be said that the disappearing Christ and the depiction of footprints appeared together as iconographic motifs, the study of many examples shows that the argument for their coincidence does not completely hold.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the iconographic pairing of traces with disappearance clearly underlines visually the juxtaposition and complementarity of absence and presence, departure and perdurance.

42. Worm, "Steine und Fussspuren Christi," 298.

43. These depictions are all from northern Europe, mostly from German areas. See Worm, "Steine und Fussspuren Christi."

44. For an English example, see the bench-end in Launcells Church, Cornwall, reproduced in Bord, *Footprints*, 37.

45. Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 3:140–64. For an exploration and refutation of Meyer Schapiro's landmark article on the disappearing Christ, see Deshman, "Another Look at the Disappearing Christ."

In two well-known woodcuts that join the motifs, *Christ's Ascension* (c. 1513) by Altdorfer and an *Ascension* of 1511 by Dürer, we the viewers see a gap between heaven and earth. Indeed that gap is the focal point, the central space, of the woodcut. In the middle of each is an emptiness that underlines the distance between what departs and what remains (Fig. 3).<sup>46</sup> Yet the Christ who departs, seen only in his vanishing feet, nonetheless feels heavy with holiness, as if he is still pressing down into the rock as he rises. What he leaves below is not emptiness but presence. The trace is *itself* both the Christ it figures and that Christ's gone-away-ness. In its evocation of absence, it saddens and even frightens; yet it entices in the presence of its materiality.

The print or trace or vestige as medieval theorists and worshippers understood it may therefore be useful as a model of what we study when we study another culture. We study presences that are also absences, in that the objects, texts, and images we consider always point beyond, to an "other" that we cannot fully grasp. They are always partial, pointing to a whole that is foreign, outside, and beyond. But we study these traces also as presences. They are not (as some modern theorists would hold) merely simulacra, ghosts, placeholders for what is not there. They are there as themselves. What they *are* is present, has power, acts. They are like those medieval footprints that point to what has departed but that also in themselves—in their outlines, in their lengths, in their physical particles—have significance and even frightening power.

In closing, then, I return to my childhood self, fascinated by stories of children or shipwrecked sailors who find, on apparently deserted islands, footprints that beckon toward the unknown. Perhaps it is no surprise if such a child grows up to pursue the study of medieval Europe no less than of India as the study of an "other." Of course, not all "others" are the same. What is "other" to any person at any moment depends (this is an obvious point!) on what family expectations and traditions, school curriculum, degree requirements, and the surrounding culture assume to be "our own." Perhaps, as cultural assumptions shifted around me, the same desire that had impelled me in the 1960s to study the European Middle Ages led me farther afield to India in the twenty-first century. As the world at home grew larger, stranger, more complex, the locus of the "other" moved farther away. Such self-scrutiny is the closest I can come to understanding my desires as xenophilia. But contemplating the topic leads me not to explore *philia* as the opposite of *phobia* or even to attempt to define *xenos*; I suspect that all these terms

46. See [www.artsy.net/artwork/albrecht-alt-dorfer-the-ascension](http://www.artsy.net/artwork/albrecht-alt-dorfer-the-ascension) and [www.wikiart.org/en/albrecht-durer/the-ascension-1511](http://www.wikiart.org/en/albrecht-durer/the-ascension-1511), both accessed June 25, 2017. For other examples, see Hamburger and Palmer, *Prayer Book of Ursula Begerin*, 1:340–42, and 2:153. See also the anony-

mous (and quite typical) woodcut, reproduced here as Fig. 2. Such simple woodcuts (whether of one footprint or two) make even starker the contrast of above, below, and the space in between.



Figure 3. Albrecht Altdorfer, *Christ's Ascension*, c. 1513, woodcut, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection: 1943.3.362. Although the image depicts ascent, Christ's feet seem to press heavily downward and almost appear as if they are protruding from a column. Credit: The National Gallery of Art



shift under our gaze as we ourselves change. A sense of continuity with a childhood self drawn to desert islands and strange footprints impels me, instead, to think about how whatever “other” we focus on is both there and not there, both part and whole, both beyond our gaze and yet present to it.

Hence the trace or footprint, as medieval thinkers understood it, seems an apt metaphor for what I have been exploring in my life as a scholar. The “other” I have pursued, whether text or object, is, on the one hand, a conjuring up of an absent something that has left only a trace; yet, on the other hand, it is a thing powerful in and of itself. After all, there would be no “other” to pursue if something strange, wonderful, and fearsome did not hover beyond, forever just out of our reach, whole although we encounter only a part. But we would have no access to that “other” if something, by its very absence, had not left behind a specific, study-able, powerful-in-itself, and very-much-present part—a vestige, or trace, or footprint.

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