

Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond  
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DAVID FRANKFURTER (University of New Hampshire)

"Shrine Gestures and Syncretism in Late Antique Christianity"

Abstract

Gesture not only complements speech; it is also the means for people to interact with the power of sacred places, things, and saints. The range of gestures that people bring to shrines (or holy men) constitutes a cultural vocabulary of sorts—a *habitus*—that includes expressive gestures (*orans*, candle-lighting), contact gestures (collecting sand; stealing cloth strips; incubation), and collective gestures (dance, feasting). It is in this range of gestures *brought* to the shrine space *from* village and domestic contexts that we see an appropriation of Christianity into local religious traditions and regional culture, and thus a dynamic religious syncretism. This paper will focus on late antique Egypt, with comparanda from elsewhere in the late antique Mediterranean world.