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Altar Space in Late Antiquity: The Water Newton Treasure and the Construction of the Sacred Space[1]

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Abstract: Dated between the second half of the 4th and the early 5th centuries CE, the Water Newton treasure is the earliest material example of a liturgical and votive Christian hoard. Previous research has focused on determining the overall function and the treasure's possible original context. This article presents an overview of the treasure's components from the perspective of their relation to the Christian altar, mainly during the Eucharist. After examining the liturgical paraphernalia and furnishings in the 4th and 5th centuries, as documented by late antique church inventories, the individual objects are studied in their ritual application. This lets us appreciate the role of material culture in defining the sacred space. The continuity with ancient traditions emerges, such as certain vessels' connection with some substances and properties or the adoption of ritual practices, reinterpreted through a new Christian meaning. Starting from the formal analysis and the written evidence, the article aims to frame the treasure in the wider perspective of the Christian altar space's development. The treasure's relation to its lost setting of perishable materials and ritual actions emphasised how the objects 'activated' the altar space, highlighting its sacredness as a place for encountering the divine.
Keywords: Cantharus; church inventories; Eucharist; incense; liturgical implements; sacredness; votives.

ENG El espacio del altar en la Antigüedad tardía: el tesoro de Water Newton y la construcción del espacio sagrado

Resumen: Fechado entre la segunda mitad del siglo IV y principios del siglo V d. C., el tesoro de Water Newton es el ejemplo material más antiguo de un tesoro litúrgico y votivo cristiano. Las investigaciones anteriores se han centrado en determinar la función general y el posible contexto original del tesoro. Este artículo presenta una visión general de los componentes del tesoro desde la perspectiva de su relación con el altar cristiano, principalmente durante la Eucaristía. Tras examinar los objetos litúrgicos y el mobiliario de los siglos IV y V, tal y como se documentan en los inventarios de las iglesias de la Antigüedad tardía, se estudian los objetos individuales en su aplicación ritual. Esto nos permite apreciar el papel de la cultura material en la definición del espacio sagrado. Surge la continuidad con las tradiciones antiguas, como la conexión de ciertos recipientes con algunas sustancias y propiedades o la adopción de prácticas rituales, reinterpretadas a través de un nuevo significado cristiano. Partiendo del análisis formal y de las pruebas escritas, el artículo pretende enmarcar el tesoro en la perspectiva más amplia del desarrollo del espacio del altar cristiano. La relación del tesoro con su entorno perdido de materiales perecederos y acciones rituales enfatizó cómo los objetos «activaban» el espacio del altar, resaltando su carácter sagrado como lugar de encuentro con lo divino.
Palabras clave: Cantharus; inventarios de iglesias; Eucaristía; incienso; instrumentos litúrgicos; sacralidad; exvotos.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Furnishing the 4th- and 5th-Century Church: Liturgical Implements in the Written Evidence. 3. The Water Newton Vessels: Between Functions and Symbols. 4. Evoking the Divine: The Water Newton Votive Plaques. 5. Conclusions. 6. Sources and Bibliographical References

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1. Introduction

In 1975, a metal detector user found a group of twenty-six silver objects – eight vessels, a strainer, seventeen plaques – and a gold disc near Peterborough (Cambridgeshire) on the site of the Roman town of Durobrivae [Fig. 1][2]. Acquired by the British Museum shortly after, it underwent extensive conservation[3]. It has been known since as the Water Newton Treasure[4]. Dated between the second half of the 4th and the early 5th centuries CE[5], it was concealed in the early decades of the 5th century CE, most likely by its owners, as shown by the careful arrangement of the objects and their usable conditions when buried[6].

The widespread presence of Chi-Rho symbols hinted quite clearly at the Christian affiliation of the treasure, hence, scholars focused on its purpose and use.

Kenneth S. Painter addressed this issue in the main contributions concerning the hoard, ascertaining its liturgical and votive functions[7]. The dedicatory inscriptions on two vessels and a plaque were key evidence[8]. Chiefly, that on the bowl dedicated by Publianus has been highlighted by Painter as referring to the liturgy, evoking the ritual use of the treasure's vessels [Figs. 1, 12][9]. Accordingly, Painter maintained that the Eucharist, offertory, or baptism could have likely involved the vessels without excluding their votive character[10].

Elaborating on Painter's earliest publications, Charles Thomas proposed a contextualisation for the hoard[11]. According to his speculation, a local Christian community could have reused one of the buildings in Durobrivae – he suggested a temple – as its shrine[12]. There, believers would have followed the ancient custom of votive dedication of vessels and plaques as part of the assimilation of the new religion by the local culture[13].

Thus, with its early dating and liturgical function, the Water Newton Treasure is unique material evidence for this pivotal moment of the development of the Christian altar space in Late Antiquity.

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2 For the discovery, cf. Kenneth S. Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian Silver* (British Museum Press, 1977), 8-9. For a detailed description of each object cf. Kenneth S. Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," in *Constantine the Great. The York's Roman Emperor*, ed. Elizabeth Hartley, Jane Hawks, Martin Henig et alii (York Museums and Art Gallery Trust, 2006), 212-222, nos. 196-222; cf. also the online entries (inv. 1975, 1002.1-27) on www.britishmuseum.org (last accessed 04/06/2025).

3 The treasure was completely cleaned and some reattachments were made, Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian*, 25-26; see also the online catalogue entries of the British Museum (inv. 1975, 1002.1-27) for the conservation history of each individual object on www.britishmuseum.org (last accessed 04/06/2025).

4 The treasure is named after the hamlet of Water Newton, which is the closest modern settlement to the ancient Durobrivae, see Kenneth S. Painter, "A fourth-century Christian Silver Treasure found at Water Newton. England, in 1975," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana*, no. 51 (1975): 333; Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian*, 8, and Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (University of California Press, 1981), 113-114.

5 The dating is mostly based on the shape of the vessels, the content of the votive inscriptions, and the comparison with some vessels from the Hoxne Treasure, buried between 407 and 450 CE, see Kenneth S. Painter, "The Water Newton Silver: Votive or Liturgical?" *Journal of British Archaeological Association* 152, no. 1 (1999): 3, https://doi.org/10.1179/jba.1999.152.1.1; Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 210-211, and Richard Hobbs and Ralph Jackson, *Roman Britain. Life at the Edge of the Empire* (The British Museum Press, 2010), 134.

6 The fragmentary objects – two jugs and some of the votive plaques – probably deteriorated after the burial or were hidden as precious fragments. The handles of the *cantharus*-shaped cup were deliberately though carefully detached before the concealment. Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 210, and Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian*, 20-21.

7 Cf. Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian*; Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 1-23, and Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 196-222. Another study by William H. C. Frend proposed parallels with 3rd- to 9th-century vessels to identify the function of the Water Newton Treasure, though they were dismissed due to the chronological distance and the later identification of the earlier comparative objects as tableware – namely those allegedly from the surroundings of Latakia (Syria) at the Cleveland Museum of Arts. Cf. William H. C. Frend, "Syrian parallels to Water Newton," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, nos. 27/28 (1984/1985): 146-150; Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 9-10. For the tableware objects at Cleveland (inv. 1954.597, 1954.597b, 1954.259, 1956.29-1956.33, 1956.35, 1956.36), see the related entries on www.clevelandart.org, (last accessed 04/06/2025).

8 See also Parts 3 and 4. For the transcription and translation of the inscriptions, cf. notes 9 (Publianus), 50 (Innocentia and Viventia), 88 (Ancilla).

9 Publianus is named under the vessel's base. On the rim runs the dedicatory inscription, which reads: *sanctum altare tuum, Domine, subnixus honoro* [trans.: *prostrating myself, o Lord, I honour your sacred sanctuary*] Roger Tomlin, *Britannia Romana. Roman Inscriptions and Roman Britain* (Oxbow Books, 2018), 380-381, no. 12.96. For the link with the liturgy, Painter pointed out the comparison with Ambrose's *De sacramentis* (4.2.7) and *De mysteriis* (8.43), Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 13-19: 14-16; cf. Jeffrey Spier, eds., *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (CS Graphics, 2007), 200-201.

10 Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 15-16. Painter also convincingly dismissed Beat Brenk's hypothesis of private ownership of the treasure, stressing its communitarian nature, cf. Beat Brenk, "La cristianizzazione della Domus dei Valerii sul Celio," *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series*, no. 30 (1999): 83-84; Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 211.

11 Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 113-121.

12 Thomas did not rule out the possibility that the treasure was concealed by a community simply passing through Durobrivae, Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 119.

13 Thomas pointed out how this practice would have "horrified the Church leaders on the continent", Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 121. Nonetheless, we have evidence for the continuity and later development of gifting churches with votives, such as 6th- and 7th-century liturgical and related vessels found in continental Europe and the Mediterranean. E.g., the Sion Treasure (Dumbarton Oaks Collections, Washington DC), see Susan A. Boyd and Marlia Mundell Mango, eds., *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in Sixth-Century Byzantium* (Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University, 1992); the Gallunianu Treasure (Museo Civico e Diocesano di Arte Sacra, Colle Val d'Elsa, Siena), see Sabina Spannocchi, "Il 'tesoro di Galognano'," in *Pian de' Campi a Poggibonsi. Santi, tesori e battaglie in un territorio di confine fra Siena e Firenze*, ed. Rosanna Merli, (Ind. Grafica Pistolesi Editrice "il Leccio", 2019), 72-88. For examples of later votive plaques, see note 101.

But what could have been the specific use of the various objects and votives during rituals? And what can this tell us about how Christianity absorbed and renewed previous traditions and symbols to convey its messages and meanings?

Through an updated overview of the treasure's different components, the present article aims to investigate the relationship of the objects with the altar space, namely their ritual involvement and contribution to conveying its sacredness. To do so, the first section will present the context of the liturgical implements in the 4th and 5th centuries from what emerges from late antique church inventories. This will allow for a better setting of the Water Newton Treasure in its time, further stressing its role as the earliest surviving Christian liturgical treasure.

The second section will focus on the treasure's vessels, reflecting on their possible ritual functions, mainly those associated with the Eucharistic celebration. Finally, a section will be devoted to the votive plaques to complete the treasure's overview and to recall the role of such objects in qualifying the space as linked to the divine.

The investigation of these different objects and their possible functions highlights the exchange of Christianity with previous traditions and practices, their adaptation to new values, and the employment of an increasingly complex environment to convey the sacredness of the altar space. This analysis of the treasure is the chance to stress again how Christianity used and reviewed ancient symbols and materials, blending them with new ideas and concepts to create a space fitting for meeting with the Christian God.

2. Furnishing the 4th- and 5th-Century Church: Liturgical Implements in the Written Evidence

The 4th century was a crucial moment of change for Christian worship. Thanks to the imperial protection, from the Constantinian dynasty onwards, the Christian Church grew exponentially both in economic means and followers[14]. This brought about new challenges and many changes also in the rituals and their setting, including the main mystery of the cult – the Eucharist[15]. On the one hand, there was a pressure to uniform and define the worship practices, as expressed by the first series of councils held in this century[16]. On the other hand, the official recognition led to the erection of buildings purposefully conceived for Christian worship, contrary to the adaptation of pre-existing structures as had happened until that moment[17].

Although very little is known about liturgical paraphernalia in this period, they likely underwent a progressive definition too. The implements needed for the rituals, namely the *vasa sacra*, and for more practical and decorative functions, can be grasped from the inventories that reached us[18].

The earliest known is that of the church of Cirta (later Constantine) in Numidia, today's Algeria. Recorded during the last persecution of Christianity in 303 CE, the list was written when the precious objects were confiscated from the church. Chalices, jugs, a pan, lighting equipment and clothing are mentioned, few in gold, and many in silver and bronze[19].

Another valuable yet complex source of information is the 6th-century compiled *Liber Pontificalis*, a collection of popes' lives from St Peter onwards[20]. The first mention of silver vessels for the church rituals – in the life of Urban I (p. 222-230 CE) – has been

14 See Averil Cameron, "Constantine and Christianity," in *Constantine the Great. The York's Roman Emperor*, ed. Elizabeth Hartley, Jane Hawks, Martin Henig et alii (York Museums and Art Gallery Trust, 2006), 96-103; and Averil Cameron, "The Rise of Christianity: From Recognition to Authority," in *Transition to Christianity. Art of Late Antiquity 3rd-7th Century AD*, ed. Anastasia Lazaridou (Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA) / Athen: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2011), 32-36. For the relationship between Church and wealth see Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Susan R. Holman, eds., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Baker Academic, 2008).

15 About ritual changes in the Eucharist see Lizette Larson-Miller, "31. Eucharistic Practices," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro, Juliette J. Day, Rikard Riotto and Richard E. DeMaris (Oxford University Press, 2018), 539-543. Cf. also Paul F. Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship. A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice* (Liturgical Press, 2010), 70-72; Béatrice Caseau, "L'Eucharistie au centre de la vie religieuse des communautés chrétiennes (Fin 4e siècle – 10e siècle)," in *Eucharistia. Encyclopédie de l'Eucharistié*, ed. Maurice Brouard (Les editions du Cerf, 2002), 125-143; Béatrice Caseau, "Sancta sanctis. Normes et gestes de la communion entre Antiquité et Moyen Âge," in *Pratiques de l'eucharistie dans l'Églises d'Orient et d'Occident (Antiquité et Moyen Âge)*, ed. Nicole Bériou, Béatrice Caseau, Dominique Rigaux (Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2009), 371-420.

16 Larson-Miller, "Eucharistic Practices," 541-543, 547.

17 Cf. Kimberly Bowes, "Christian Worship," in *Transition to Christianity. Art of Late Antiquity 3rd-7th Century AD*, ed. Anastasia Lazaridou (Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA) / Athen: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2011), 53-55; Sible De Blaauw, "A Classic Question: The Origins of the Church Basilica and Liturgy," in *Costantino e i costantinidi: l'innovazione costantiana, le sue radici e i suoi sviluppi*, ed. Olof Brandt, Gabriele Castiglia and Vincenzo Fiocchi Nicolai (Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2016), 553-562; Giovanni Liccardo *Architettura e liturgia nella Chiesa antica,* (Skira, 2005), 144-146; Claire Sotinel, "Les lieux de culte chrétiens et le sacré dans l'Antiquité tardive," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, no. 222 (2005): 411-434, https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.4473, and Ann M. Yasin, "29. Sacred Space and Visual Art," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford University Press, 2012), 937-947.

18 For an extensive analysis of late antique inventories as evidence for churches' interiors, see Béatrice Caseau, "Objects in Churches: The Testimony of Inventories," in *Objects in Context Objects in Use. Material Spatiality in Late Antiquity*, ed. Luke Lavan, Ellen Swift and Toon Putzeys (Brill, 2007), 551-579.

19 More precisely: two golden chalices, six silver chalices, six small silver jugs, one small silver pan, eight silver lamps and other lighting equipment (lamps, torches, and candelabra, mostly in bronze), numerous clothing (for both women and men), and a *capitulata* (an ewer or – more likely – a head- or bust-shaped incense burner, as attested by domestic findings). See Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 569-570; for the Latin transcription cf. St Optatus of Milevis, *Libri VII*, ed. Carolus Ziwsa (F. Tempsky, G. Freytag, 1893), 187.

20 Here the translation and commentary provided by Raymond Davis have been followed. For further literature, see Raymond Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis). The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715* (Liverpool University Press, 2010); for the Latin transcription, see Louis Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire par l'abbé L. Duchesne* (Ernest Thorin Éditeur, 1886-1892); for critical studies on the *Liber Pontificalis* as evidence for archaeological and art historical research see Herman Geertman, *Hic fecit basilicam. Studi sul Liber Pontificalis e gli edifici ecclesiastici di Roma da Silvestro a Silverio*, ed. Sible de Blaauw (Peeters Publisher, 2004).

proved to be an invention of the compilers[21]. For the 4th and early 5th centuries, the compilers likely reported donation lists from earlier documents, which Raymond Davis pointed out to be mostly reliable. In the 4th-century popes' lives, the Constantinian donations stand out for their grandeur and wealth[22]. These endowments included the furnishing and equipment for churches and the properties for their financial support. Besides their affluence, it is possible to note the recurrence of some types of objects – such as chalices, patens, *amae* ('ewers?'), (votive?) crowns, *scyphi*, and chandeliers – and materials – gold, silver, bronze. The same situation can also be found in endowments by later 4th- and 5th-century popes and emperors[23].

The *Liber Pontificalis* is frequently associated with a donation to a rural church near Tivoli made in 471 CE by the Gothic Magister Militum Flavius Valila – the *Charta Cornutiana*[24]. The same objects as those frequently mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*' donations are included on this list, and they are made of silver and bronze[25]. Textile furnishing and books are also recorded, further expanding our knowledge about patronage and, consequently, the likely appearance of the sacred space in the 5th century[26].

It is important to mention that identifying the terms used within inventories is not always straightforward and requires considering local characteristics of the analysed text, as pointed out by Béatrice Caseau Chevallier in one of the main contributions on this topic[27]. Moreover, the author highlighted the issue of linking the archaeological and written evidence, since inventories never mention the specific use of objects and remain a partial testimony, recording the main wealth of the church rather than giving a complete picture of its interiors[28].

Keeping this in mind, it is still possible to infer from these sources that the use of silver and, more generally, vessels specifically intended for the liturgy and church furnishing were already present in the early 4th century. Following liturgical needs, the indispensable paraphernalia included the chalice and the paten, which were meant to host and distribute the wine and the bread during the ritual, and likely other objects for their preparation[29]. Nonetheless, as recalled by Painter, a specific shape for these objects was not yet outlined in the 4th century. Rather, already established types of vessels were employed, and only the authority of the context and the person using them suggested their sacredness[30]. This was further strengthened by the fact that vessels could change function from profane to sacred through donations and endowments. Therefore, tableware and liturgical vessels had a comparable shape[31]. To complicate the picture even more, the elite used Christian symbols on private tableware to display their allegiance to the imperial house or Christianity, as the presence of mythological decorations hinted at their education and affiliation to the values of *paideia* (Classical education)[32].

3. The Water Newton Vessels: Between Functions and Symbols

The evidence from the 4th and early 5th centuries proves the presence of silver vessels in churches and their likely use during the liturgy[33]. However, the shape of these vessels was not yet defined, with a complex situation of open interchange between the sacred and profane worlds of both values and forms.

With this information in mind, we can now turn to the Water Newton Treasure and analyse its eight vessels [Fig. 1]. The largest is a round dish with flaring walls, followed by four bowls, slightly different in shape and dimensions. Two of them bear dedicatory inscriptions, whereas another stands out for its

21 John N. D. Kelly and Michael Welsh, eds., *A Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford University Press, 2015), s. v. *Urban I, St*, oxfordreference.com.

22 Davis stressed how these should be understood as a 'collection' of the endowments of the Constantinian dynasty through the first half of the 4th century, rather than a complex, large donation by Constantine alone, see Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, xxviii-xxx, 4-26; cf. Antonella Ballardini, "Incensum et odor suavitatis: l'arte aromatica nel Liber Pontificalis," in *L'officina dello sguardo. Scritti in onore di Maria Andaloro*, ed. Giulia Bordi, Iole Carlettini, Maria Luigia Fobelli et alii (Gangemi Editore, 2014), 263.

23 Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, xxxviii-xli, 30-31, 33-40, 42-45; cf. Geertman, *Hic fecit basilicam*, 133, 174.

24 See already the 19th-century edition of *Liber Pontificalis* by Louis Duchesne, Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis*, CXL-VI-CXLVIII. For an analysis of the list of the objects and textiles donated in the *Charta Cornutiana*, see Herman Geertman, "L'arredo della ecclesia Cornutianensis. Annotazioni intorno alla donazione di Flavius Valila (417)," in *Marmoribus Vestita. Miscellanea in onore di Federico Guidobaldi* (Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2011), 599-612.

25 Geertman, "L'arredo della ecclesia Cornutianensis," 602-603.

26 Geertman, "L'arredo della ecclesia Cornutianensis," 603-605.

27 Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 573-575.

28 Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 552-553.

29 It is the case, e.g., of ewers which Caseau Chevallier proposed to identify in various *amae* listed within inventories, Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 556; cf. Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 106-107, and Geertman, *Hic fecit basilicam*, 45-51. For the main *vasa sacra* – chalice and paten – see Marlia Mundell Mango, "The Uses of Liturgical Silver. 4th-7th Centuries," in *Church and People in Byzantium*, ed. Rosemary Morris (The Bemrose Press, 1990), 246.

30 Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 10, and Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 211. For the similarities between liturgical and non-liturgical vessels see Gemma Sena Chiesa, "Argenti di uso liturgico fra IV e V secolo d.C.," *Antichità Altoadriatiche*, no. 66 (2008): 553-596.

31 Sena Chiesa, "Argenti di uso liturgico," 563-565, and Ruth Leader Newby, "15. Early Christian Silver. Sacred and Domestic," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (Routledge, 2018), 246-252.

32 For instance: François Baratte, "Vaisselle d'argent et société dans la Rome de l'antiquité tardive: luxe, politique et religion à la lumière de quelques récentes découvertes," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 156, no. 1 (2012): 183-212, https://doi.org/10.3406/crai.2012.93395. For Christian symbols, inscriptions, and imagery on everyday objects see Josef Engemann, "Anmerkungen zu spätantiken Geräten des Alltagslebens mit christlichen Bildern, Symbolen und Inschriften," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, no. 15 (1972): 154-173. For the political allegiance expressed through iconographic and symbolic themes on late antique silverware cf. Franz Alto Bauer, *Gabe und Person. Geschenke als Träger personaler Aura in der Spätantike* (Universitätsbibliothek Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, 2009), and Arne Effenberger, "Das Theodosius-Missorium von 388: Anmerkungen zur politischen Ikonographie in der Spätantike," in *Novum millennium: Studies in Byzantine History and Culture Presented to Paul Speck*, ed. Claudia Sode and Sarolta A. Takács (Routledge, 2001). For the role of mythological images in evoking the Classical culture and *paideia*, cf. Ruth E. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity. Functions and Meanings of the Silver Plate in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries* (Routledge, 2004), 123-160; Sena Chiesa, "Argenti di uso liturgico," 565.

33 See Part 2.

Figure 1. The Water Newton Treasure, silver, gilding, gold, second half or late 4th century CE, British Museum, London, (inv. 1975, 1002.1–27), source: The British Museum Images © The Trustees of the British Museum.

cantharus shape, with handles and a knop between the foot and the cup[34]. The most decorated objects of the treasure are a jug and a hanging bowl, both enriched with geometrical and vegetal reliefs. Another fragmentary and less decorated jug concludes the series of vessels. The strainer, which is richly decorated with dolphins and a terminal disc with Chi-Rho on the handle, should be added to this group. Besides one of the jugs, the hanging bowl, and the strainer, the Water Newton objects do not show any elaborate decoration, mostly limited to the Chi-Rho symbol and the votive inscriptions[35].

What could have been the function of these vessels during the rituals? And can this give us a glimpse of their role in the sacralisation of the space? Without knowing the original context, a precise reconstruction cannot be made. Nonetheless, some elements allow a few considerations.

A table and a cup were already mentioned as essential equipment for the Christian sacred meal in 1st-century sources, such as in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians[36]. These 'basic' elements were kept in the later distinction of the Eucharist from the communal meal, as implied in the description of the ritual by Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 CE), where wine and bread are offered at the altar by the believers, prayed over by the bishop, and distributed to the community[37]. The same ritual structure continued in the 3rd century with bread and a cup constituting the community's main offering, as testified by both Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 210–258 CE)[38] and the *Traditio Apostolica*[39]. The 4th-century Eucharistic prayers and treaties followed the same direction, though enriching the gifts offering with a new invocation to the divine power to transform the bread and the cup into the actual body and blood of Christ. This is explicit, for instance, in the writings by Cyril of

34 The *cantharus* or *kantharos* was a handled cup commonly used for wine and beverages consumption in Graeco-Roman convivial context, see Andrew J. Clark, Maya Elston and Mary Louise Hart, *Understanding Greek Vases. A Guide to Terms, Styles, and Techniques* (Getty Publications, 2002), 101.

35 Leader-Newby, "Early Christian Silver," 243-244. Painter suggested that this would have suited the liturgical function of the vessels, Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 211.

36 Paul referred to the "table of the Lord" and the "cup of blessings" or "cup of the Lord", (1 Cor 10:21; 11:21; 11:27), see Stephan Heid, *Altar and Church. Principles of Liturgy from Early Christianity* (Schnell & Steiner, 2023), 54-67: 57-58. Cf. also Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 41-46.

37 "[...] when we have finished praying, bread and wine are brought up, and the president likewise sends up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and the (elements over which) thanks have been given are distributed, and everyone partakes [...]", *First Apology*, 67.3-5, translation from Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 47. For Justin Martyr's description of the Eucharist, see also Caseau, "Sancta sanctis. Normes et gestes," 385-386; George P. Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy. The Symbolism of Early Christian and Byzantine Bread Stamps* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 42; Heid, *Altar and Church*, 170-171.

38 Cyprian recalled the same ritual structure described by Justin, adding that the faithful brought home the blessed food remaining from the ritual, for instance, in the *De Opere et eleemosynis*, 15, and the *Epistolae*, 1.2, 12.2. See Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 66; Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy*, 42-43.

39 A collection of different texts, the *Traditio Apostolica* was traditionally attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–235), though it might contain 4th-century additions. In the Eucharistic prayer, the offerings to God are bread and a cup, *Traditio Apostolica*, 4.11. See Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 53-54, 59-60, 65; Paul F. Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, (Fortress Press, 2002), 37-49: 40, 44-47.

Jerusalem (ca. 313–386 CE)[40] and Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–397 CE)[41]. Hence, both the altar table and the liturgical implements acquired their sacredness through ritual use by a religious authority, as mentioned by Athanasius (ca. 296/298–373 CE) and Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444 CE)[42]. Although none of these sources mentions any precise vessel except for the chalice/cup, the reference to the Eucharistic ritual allows us to understand the context in which the Water Newton objects were used[43].

After the altar cloth was laid, the altar would have been suitable for staging the main Christian mystery [Fig. 5][44]. The active involvement of the objects would have started with the believers' offering (*prosphora*) of bread and wine, collected by the clergy. Subsequently, the food would have been consecrated through a prayer and an invocation by the bishop and redistributed to the community[45].

Like later patens, the large dish would have been appropriate for collecting the loaves during the *prosphora* and for the following redistribution to the community [Fig. 1][46].

The wine required vessels to carry and distribute liquids. Many objects of the Water Newton Treasure can be related to these functions: two jugs, four bowls, and a strainer [Figs. 1, 2, 12][47]. Not all of them would necessarily have been involved in the Eucharistic celebration, but it seems likely that at least one of the jugs and the strainer would have been used to pour the wine and filter its sediment[48].

The offertory ritual is directly mentioned on the bowl dedicated by Publianus, key evidence to the identification of the whole treasure as liturgical [Fig. 12][49]. The other inscribed vessel evokes the act of gift-giving too, although more customarily and indirectly[50]. Both these bowls might have been used to distribute the Eucharistic wine while hinting at their donors at the same time[51]. But the Water Newton Treasure numbers also two more bowls: one shallower and plain, and a smaller *cantharus* ('handled chalice') [Figs. 1, 2].

Figure 2. The Cantharus-shaped bowl, Water Newton Treasure, silver, second half or late 4th century CE, British Museum, London, (inv. 1975, 1002.6), source: The British Museum Images © The Trustees of the British Museum

40 Cyril of Jerusalem invoked God to send the Holy Spirit to bless and turn the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ, and later encouraged the believer to use the sacred species to perform a blessing over their organs of sense before eating and drinking them, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 5.7, 21-2. See Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 60, 71-72; Caseau, "Sancta sanctis. Normes et gestes," 414, 415-416.

41 Ambrose of Milan affirmed that through the repetition of Christ's words, bread and wine acquired their holiness, *De sacramentis*, 5.14. See Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 61.

42 Athanasius described as a sacrilege to willingly break the chalice, which had to be kept in the church, see *Apologia contra Arianos*, 11. Cyril of Alexandria stressed how the liturgical vessels were to be used exclusively by the priests and for the service of the altar, due to their sacredness, see *Commentarius in Zachariam prophetam*, CXVI. See Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy*, 45. For the Greek transcription and Latin translation, see Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca*, 161 vols., (Imprimerie Catholique, 1857-1866), vol. 25, 267-270, vol. 72, 271-274.

43 We do not have sources describing how the Eucharistic liturgy was carried out in Britain, but the recorded presence of British bishops at the councils of Arles (314 CE), Serdica (343 CE), and Arminium (359 CE) seems to imply their adherence to the main tendency of the period, see David Petts, "32. Christianity in Roman Britain," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain*, ed. Martin Millett et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 661-663.

44 Heid stated that the practice of covering the altar with an altar cloth was established by the 4th century, if not earlier; Heid, *Altar and Church*, 67. About the employment of altar cloths in later periods cf. Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 565-567; Clementina Rizzardi, "La suppellettile liturgica a Ravenna e nella sfera bizantina tra arte, liturgia e autorappresentazione (secoli V-IX)," *Hortus artium medievalium*, no. 15 (2009): 49-50 https://doi.org/10.1484/J.HAM.3.42, and Geertman, "L'arredo della ecclesia Cornutianensis," 603-604.

45 For the *prosphora* and the role of bread in early Christian rituals see Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy*, 41-46. Cf. Béatrice Caseau, "Autour de l'autel: le contrôle des donateurs et des donations alimentaires," in *Donateurs et donations dans le monde byzantin*, ed. Jean-Michel Spieser and Élisabeth Yota (Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 48-52; Béatrice Caseau, "Les marqueurs de pain, objets rituels dans le christianisme antique et byzantin." *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, no. 4 (2014): 601, https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.8318; and Larson-Miller, "Eucharistic Practices," 543.

46 This attribution was proposed in Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 216 no. 202; cf. Painter's earlier publications.

47 Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 212-218, nos. 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 203, 204.

48 The wine was collected in larger containers (*metretae*) and from there brought to the altar using ewers or jugs (*amae*) to be poured into cups or chalices, see Geertman, *Hic fecit basilicam*, 45. For the use of strainers in domestic and religious contexts, cf. Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 218 no. 204.

49 For Publianus' inscription cf. note 9. Frend proposed to interpret Publianus' bowl as a reliquary, though it was convincingly dismissed by Painter, cf. William H. C. Frend, "Altare subnixus: A Cult of Relics in the Romano-British Church?", *The Journal of Theological Studies* 48, no. 1 (1997): 125-128, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23966762, and Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 17-19.

50 It is the fragmentary inscription by Innocentia and Viventia, which reads: *(alpha Chi-Rho omega) Innocentia et Viventia lib[...] [...]runt* [trans: *Innocentia and Viventia gave (this) willingly*] Tomlin, *Britannia Romana*, 380 no. 12.95. Cf. Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 10-11, and Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 214 no. 199.

51 I would like to thank Dr. Richard Hobbs for the suggestion and Dr. Ian Randall for the support in the comparison of the Publianus', and Innocentia and Viventia's vessels' shapes with pottery production, which highlighted a similarity with drinking and cooking bowls. For Romano-British pottery parallels, see David S. Peacock, *Pottery in the Roman World: An Ethnoarchaeological Approach* (Longman Group Limited, 1982), 83 fig. 38 nos. 9, 12, 14; Paul A. Tyers, *Roman Pottery in Britain* (B. T. Batsford, 1996), 141 fig. 152 no. 16, 147 fig. 166 nos. 7-10, 149 fig. 170 no. 5.1 and fig. 171 no. 20.1, 167 fig. 206 no. 4, 171 fig. 213 nos. 5, 7-8, 177 fig. 220 no. C79, 183 fig. 227 nos. 12.2-12.3.

The latter is particularly interesting: its shape is closely related to the Classical tradition, showing once more how the form of liturgical implements was not always distinguished from that of the tableware[52]. It is also interesting to notice how the *cantharus* shape was associated with wine drinking and the wine god Dionysus in Roman culture, following a tradition dating back to the Greeks and Etruscans[53]. David Parrish demonstrated how this association, though increasingly deprived of its Roman polytheistic content, was still present in later centuries, especially in convivial contexts[54]. Thus, it is not surprising that, in the gradual Christianization of Roman society, shared symbols and associations, such as that between the *cantharus* and wine, were kept in mind[55].

Figure 3. Mosaic Panel from the floor of the first basilica, 370-380 CE, Euphrasian Episcopal Complex, Poreč, ©Simon Jenkins. Public License CC-BY-SA-2.0, source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/simonjenkins/8189122802/

The continuity of this association in Christianity is demonstrated by the presence of *cantharus*-shaped vessels in images within sacred contexts, connected with the Eucharist and the wine. In some instances, a *krater*[56] depicted as an oversized *cantharus* represented the *vas vitae* ('life-giving vase'), like in the floor mosaic panel related to the altar in the first Poreč basilica (370–380 CE) [Fig. 3][57].

In others, it symbolised the wine offering, like in the wall mosaic panel with the Old Testament offering of Melchizedek in S. Maria Maggiore in Rome (432–440 CE) [Fig. 4][58].

Figure 4. Mosaic Panel with the Offering of Melchizedek, 432-440 CE, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, source: Scala Archives 2025©Foto Scala, Firenze

The similarity with the Water Newton *cantharus* is evident in the latter example, except for the dimensions [Figs. 2, 4]. In the presbytery mosaics in S. Vitale, Ravenna (first half of the 6th century CE), the *cantharus* shape occurs multiple times, the most emblematic being the altar chalice on the southern lunette, with the offering of Abel and Melchizedek [Fig. 5][59].

52 Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 216.

53 George W. Elderkin, *Kantharos. Studies in Dionysiac and Kindred Cult* (Princeton University Press, 1924).

54 David Parrish, "A Mythological Theme in the Decoration of Late Roman Dining Rooms: Dionysos and his Circle," *Revue Archéologique*, no. 2 (1995): 307–332, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41737826.

55 Elderkin, *Kantharos*, 41-48.

56 The *krater* was a large vessel used in Graeco-Roman convivial contexts to mix wine and water before consumption, cf. Clark, Elston and Hart, *Understanding Greek Vases*, 104-105.

57 Mario Mirabella Roberti, "L'arredo delle basiliche paleocristiane nell'Alto Adriatico e in Africa," *Antichità Altoadriatiche*, no. 5 (1974): 372, http://hdl.handle.net/10077/20592. For the iconography of the *vas vitae* between Roman polytheism and Christianity cf. Elderkin, *Kantharos*, 15-19.

58 S. Maria Maggiore's mosaic panel with Melchizedek has been related to the altar space due to its closeness with the apsidal area, cf. Maria R. Menna, "I mosaici della basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore," in *L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini 312-468*, ed. Maria Andaloro (Jaca Book, 2006), 312-313, 328-330, and Penelope Filacchione, "Melchisedek re, sacerdote dell'Altissimo. Stratificazioni iconografiche e concettuali," in *Sacerdozio pagano e sacerdozio cristiano*, ed. Miran Sajovic and Mario Maritano (Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2011), 188-189.

59 The *cantharus* appears as *vas vitae* four times as a golden, larger vessel on the mosaics of the top part of the lateral walls, and four times flanked by peacocks on the pulvinos' stuccoes of the ground floor's columns. Two smaller golden *cantharus* chalices flanked by parrots are depicted at the bottom of the main arch's intrados, at the presbytery's threshold.

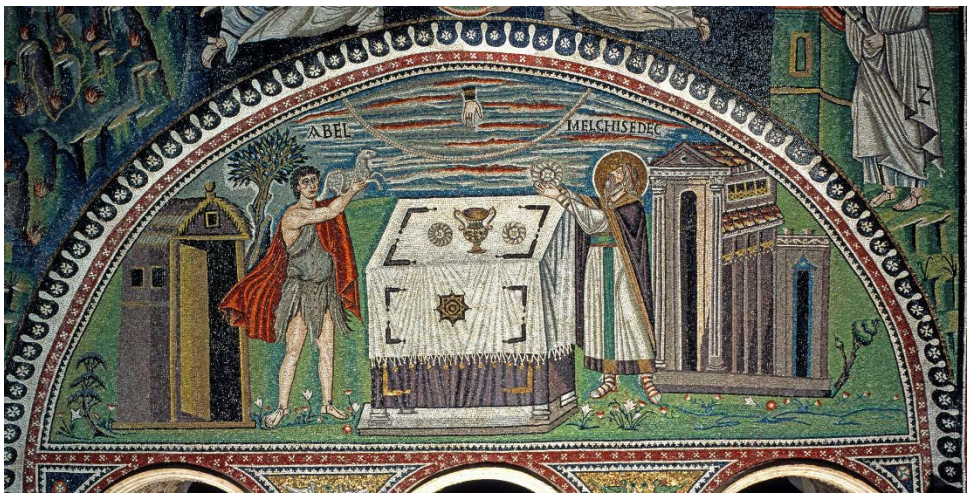

Figure 5. Mosaic with the Offering of Abel and Melchizedek, first half of the 6th century CE, San Vitale, Ravenna, source: Scala Archives 2025©A. Dagli Orti/Scala, Firenze

Golden and jewelled, the offering *cantharus* in S. Vitale is depicted at the centre of the altar, directly under God's blessing hand [Fig. 6]. These few examples, distant in time and space, show how this vessel's shape was charged with new Christian meanings. Partially elaborating on Roman polytheistic association with wine and life-giving properties, it was considered suitable to represent the holy wine. Indeed, it does not seem a coincidence that two of these examples depict the offering of Melchizedek, conceived as the Biblical forerunner and ideal founder of the liturgy[60].

The *cantharus* or handled chalice has been found also in later material occurrences, proving the long durée of this form. The oldest example in Western Europe after the Water Newton's is the Chalice of Gourdon (Bibiliothèque Nationale de France, Paris) [Fig. 7]. Found in a late-5th-century treasure near Gourdon (South-Eastern France), it was paired with an equally small and similarly crafted paten. Marco Aimone proposed that these objects were used for the private Communion of their owner[61]. In that case, the fact that the chalice followed once again the Classical shape of the *cantharus* to represent the 'ideal' container for the sacred wine seems illustrative. Its decorations – vine branches and gryphon-shaped handles – seem to foster this interpretation, recalling both wine and Christ[62].

Figure 6. Detail with the Altar Mensa and the Hand of God, Mosaic with the Offering of Abel and Melchizedek, first half of the 6th century CE, San Vitale, Ravenna, source: Scala Archives 2025©A. Dagli Orti/Scala, Firenze

Also dating to the 5th century but from the Eastern Mediterranean, the Ardaburius and Anthousa Chalice (Dumbarton Oaks Collections, Washington DC) [Fig. 8] sports handles too, though closer to a classical *scyphus* than a *cantharus*[63]. The same can be said for the possibly Syrian 6th-century chalice donated by

For the offering *cantharus*, cf. Filacchione, "Melchisedek re, sacerdote," 189-196; Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, "21. The Mosaics of Ravenna," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (Routledge, 2018), 357, and Antonella Rinaldi and Paola Novara, *Restauri dei monumenti paleocristiani e bizantini di Ravenna patrimonio dell'umanità* (Comune di Ravenna, 2013), 187. For the comparison between the four golden *vasa vitae* on the lateral walls and the offering chalice, cf. Rizzardi, "La suppellettile liturgica a Ravenna," 41-42, figs. 5a, 5b.

60 Filacchione, "Melchisedek re, sacerdote," 185-198.

61 That this pair of objects, likely Burgundian or Merovingian, was following a Classical or 'old-fashioned' Roman tradition is also demonstrated by the rectangular paten, which directly recalls the antique lanx – a rectangular tray attested by 4th-century silver examples. Marco Aimone, "Calice et patène eucharistique de Gourdon," in *Les temps merovingiens. Trois siècles d'art et de culture (451-751)*, ed. Isabelle Baridès-Fronty, Charlotte Denoël and Inès Vilella-Petit (Editions Réunion des musées nationaux - Grand Palais, 2016), 117.

62 As proposed by Aimone, the griffin was seen as a symbol of Christ, whereas the vine branches immediately evoked wine,

Aimone, "Calice et patène," p. 117.

63 The *scyphus* or *skyphos* was another type of Graeco-Roman drinking vessel, characterised by its horizontal handles, see Clark, Elston and Hart, *Understanding Greek Vases*, 145. For the chalice of Ardaburius and Anthousa see Kristen J. Smith, "50. Chalice Dedicated by Anthousa and Ardabarios," in *Byzantine Women and Their World*, ed. Ioli Kalavrezou (Yale University Press, 2003), 111; cf. also the online catalogue

Sarra (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), which appears as a 'cup' chalice – rounded bowl, high foot – with additional handles[64]. Besides these examples, most liturgical chalices from the 6th and later centuries appear as 'cup' handleless chalices[65].

Figure 7. The Chalice of Gourdon, gold, turquoises and garnets inlays, late 5th century, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département monnaies, médailles et antiques Paris, (inv. 56.96), source: gallica.bnf.fr ©BnF

What does all this have to do with the Water Newton *cantharus*? What can suggest to us about its use? This coeval and mostly later evidence seem to highlight a relation between the *cantharus*-shaped vessels and the sacred wine – though not an exclusive one. The Water Newton *cantharus* could have been purposefully made for liturgical use or converted as such after being donated. Whatever the case, one may wonder if its shape, clearly distinguished from the other vessels of the treasure and traditionally related to wine, could have been exploited during the consecration or any other pivotal moment of the ritual to highlight the sacred wine.

Figure 8. The Ardaburius and Anthousa Chalice, silver, 5th century, Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington DC, (inv. BZ.1959.66), source: museum.doaks.org © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC

Written sources can give us an insight into the presence and names of multiple drinking vessels during church rituals. Within the aforementioned lists of the *Liber Pontificalis,* Béatrice Caseau-Chevallier observed that the words *scyphus* and *calix* were used alternately to refer to chalices and drinking vessels. According to her, *scyphus* could have referred to a handled cup, though more likely larger than the Water Newton *cantharus*, due to the weight recorded in inventories[66]. Furthermore, Davis suggested that the *scyphus* would sometimes indicate the main chalice on the altar as distinguished from the *calices ministeriales* used to distribute the wine after consecration[67]. In another study, Herman Geertman highlighted how the coincidence of the weight of *amae* ('ewers') and *scyphi* could pinpoint their relation in carrying and consecrating the wine. The relationship of both objects with the altar would explain their frequent description as made of precious materials[68]. On the other hand, the term *cantharus* appears within the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Charta Cornutiana* to qualify lamps (*fara*) rather than chalices. This would have been related to the word *cantherius*, meaning raft or support, and not to the drinking vessel, thus indicating the suspension of the lamp rather than its shape[69].

entry (inv. BZ.1959.66) http://museum.doaks.org/objects-1/info/36066 (last accessed 04/06/2025).

64 Kristen J. Smith, "49. Chalice Dedicated by Sarra," in *Byzantine Women and Their World*, ed. Ioli Kalavrezou (Yale University Press, 2003), 110; cf. the online catalogue entry (inv. 1971.633) https://collections.mfa.org/objects/262266/chalice (last accessed 04/06/2025).

65 From Western Europe, all the examples date after the 8th century, except for the Gallonianu Treasure (6th century), cf. Victor H. Elbern, "Der eucharistische Kelch im frühen Mittelalter," *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, no. 17 (1963): 1-76, 117-188, and Spannocchi, "Il 'tesoro di Galognano'," 72-88. Most of the liturgical treasures come from the Eastern Mediterranean and are dated between the 6th and 7th centuries. For an overview, see Marlia Mundell Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium. The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures* (The Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery, 1986), and Boyd and Mundell Mango, *Ecclesiastical Silver*.

66 Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 556-557.

67 Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 107. On the contrary, Elbern proposed that the handles would imply the use as *calix ministerialis*, facilitating handling and distribution; see Elbern, "Der eucharistische Kelch," 27, and Victor H. Elbern, "Über die liturgische Kunst im frühbyzantinische Altarraum," in *Fructus Operis. Kunstgeschichtliche Aufsätze aus fünf Jahrzehnten. Zum 80. Geburtstag des Verfassers in Verbindung mit der Görres-Gesellschaft*, ed. by Piotr Skubiszewski (Schnell & Steiner, 1998), 29-30.

68 Geertman, *Hic fecit basilicam*, 51.

69 For the *fara canthara* in the *Liber Pontificalis* see Geertman, *Hic fecit basilicam*, 53-67: 54-55, and Davis, *The Book of Pon-*

If we were to follow these hints, we could imagine that the Water Newton *cantharus* would have been used to consecrate the wine, being the only cup with handles, which could have been subsequently distributed with the two inscribed bowls to the faithful[70].

But wine was not the only liquid used in church liturgy. Although not one of the sacred species, water played a key role in the preparatory rituals for the Eucharist. Anthea Harris and Martin Henig have associated this function with the fragmentary hanging bowl [Fig. 9][71], proposing an alternative to Painter's interpretation as a suspended lamp[72]. Rupert Bruce-Mitford and Sheila Raven pointed out that hanging bowls could have been employed in water rituals, recalling Adolph Mahr's suggestion that they could have been lowered during cleansing rituals or to clean other liturgical implements[73]. Due to its limited dimensions – 18 cm width – it seems unlikely that Water Newton's hanging bowl was employed to clean other vessels or in the ritual cleaning of feet. Indeed, Harris and Henig link our bowl specifically to the hand-washing ritual, rooted in Biblical and Roman cultures[74]. It was soon incorporated within the Christian liturgy, combining the practical need for the celebrant to have clean hands with the symbolic one of purity to deal with sacred space and matter[75]. The hanging bowl would have been paired with an ewer to perform this ritual. It is tempting, yet purely speculative, to imagine the decorated ewer [Fig. 1, top left] employed as such. Indeed, both objects are highly ornamented, evoking through the rich vegetal and geometrical patterns what Ann Marie Yasin has called an "abundance of the terrestrial and celestial paradise" [Figs. 1, 9][76]. Alternatively, the shallow and plain bowl mentioned in the group of vessels could have also served this purpose due to its close resemblance to the hanging bowl [Fig. 1, on the front to the left].

Figure 9. The Hanging Bowl, Water Newton Treasure, silver, second half or late 4th century CE, British Museum, London, (inv. 1975, 1002.2), source: The British Museum Images © The Trustees of the British Museum

The purity of the sacred space was also achieved by spreading perfumes, chiefly incense[77]. This practice was well established in the ancient world, and Christianity seems to have adopted it after Constantine's formal protection, though with some initial concerns[78]. As pointed out by Caseau Chevallier, the Christian use of incense may have been rooted not in the ritual sacrifice performed in Biblical Judaism or Roman polytheism, but rather in

tiffs, 117; for those in the *Charta Cornutiana* see Geertman, "L'arredo della ecclesia Cornutianensis," 602.

70 As kindly suggested to me by Dr. Richard Hobbs, this might be further proved by the capacity of the vessels. Through an approximate calculation, it turned out that the vessels dedicated by Publianus and Innocentia and Viventia could hold, respectively, circa 1,2 and 1,9 litres, whereas the *cantharus* chalice only 0,8 litres. The consecrated wine might have been mixed with water in the larger vessels to be distributed. For the calculation method of the vessels' capacity, see J. R. Thomas and Carole Wheeler, "Methods of Calculating the Capacity of Pottery Vessels," in *Conspicuous Liquid Consumption. A Re-Evaluation Exercise of the New Bodleian Extension Site, Broad Street, Oxford 1937* (University of Oxford, 2002), Potweb Ashmolean Museum. Consulted May 27, 2025. https://potweb.ashmolean.org/New-Bodleian/11-Calculating.html#image6

71 The association with water rituals was also based on to the 'delicacy' of the decoration and stability of the hanging bowl, see Anthea Harris and Martin Henig, "Hand-washing and Foot-washing, Sacred and Saint, in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period," in *Intersections. The Archaeology and History of Christianity in England, 400-1200*, ed. Martin Henig and Nigel Ramsay (Archeopress, 2010), 31-32.

72 The decoration on the underside, the surviving suspension rings, and the chain pieces have confirmed the bowl used to be suspended, Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 3, 10. The identification as a lamp was mostly based on the parallel with glass bowls with unknown functions, see Kenneth S. Painter, "A Note on the Water-Newton Hanging Bowl and Other Roman Hanging Vessels," in *The Corpus of Late Celtic Hanging Bowls: With an Account of the Bowls Found in Scandinavia*, Rupert Bruce-Mitford and Sheila Raven (Oxford University Press, 2005), 81, 462 no. 2/4, and Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 212-213 no. 197. For the glass comparisons, see Donald B. Hardan, Kenneth Painter, and David *Whitehouse eds., Glass of the Caesars / Vetri dei Cesari*, (Olivetti 1987), 196 no. 106, 204-205 no. 113; Clasina Isings, *Roman Glass from Dated Finds* (J. B. Wolters, 1957), 133-137, form 107.

73 Rupert Bruce-Mitford and Sheila Raven, *The Corpus of Late Celtic Hanging Bowls: With an Account of the Bowls Found in Scandinavia*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 30-33, and Harris and Henig, "Hand-washing," 31-32.

74 Harris and Henig, "Hand-washing," 28-31.

75 Harris and Henig, "Hand-washing," 26. For the issue of purity and purification, see Caseau, "Sancta sanctis. Normes et gestes," 390-412; Thomas Kazen, "13. Purification," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro, Juliette J. Day, Rikard Riotto and Richard E. DeMaris (Oxford University Press, 2018), 220-244.

76 Yasin "Sacred Space and Visual Art," 949.

77 Beate Fricke, "Swinging through Time: Censers in the Latin West," in *Holy Smoke: Censers Across Cultures*, ed. Beate Fricke, (Hirmer Verlag, 2024), 192.

78 The offering of incense was strongly associated with pre-Christian sacrifices, both in the Roman polytheistic and Jewish traditions. There is no agreement on the moment of adoption of incense in church rituals, which is variably set between the 4th and the early 5th century, cf. Béatrice Caseau Chevallier, "Odorat, encensement et encensoirs. Le paysage olfactif des espaces sacrés dans les églises tardo-antiques," in *Rituels religieux et sensorialité: Antiqutié et Moyen Âge*, ed. Béatrice Caseau Chevallier and Elisabetta Neri (Silvana Editoriale, 2021), 436; Hannah Lents, "Swinging Censers: The Late Antique Christian Transition to Incense Use in the Fourth to Sixth Centuries CE" (MA diss., Brandeis University, 2016), 17-23, https://doi.org/10.48617/etd.845, and Ballardini, "Incensum et odor suavitatis," 263-264, 269 n. 3.

the domestic practices of purifying and welcoming guests[79]. Only in a later moment, the ancient link between incense and divine presence was eventually affirmed within the church[80].

Besides the initial reason for the introduction of incense, could the hanging bowl from Water Newton have been used as a censer? The shape of censers was still diversified in the 4th and 5th centuries, spanning from larger standing censers to head-like vessels and smaller bowls[81]. With the affirmation of the use of incense in Christian rituals, swinging censers suitable for the liturgy were developed[82]. This happened later than the period of interest here, and it seems unlikely that the Water Newton hanging bowl could have been swung. If ever used to burn frankincense, it is more probable that the bowl was simply suspended within the sacred space to perfume the air, just like the standing incense burner common in Antiquity[83]. This is also recalled within the *Liber Pontificalis*: in some instances, the *thymiaterion* (incense burner) is described as hanging over or in front of significant spots[84]. This would also suit the Water Newton's hanging bowl's appearance, with no foot and full decoration on the underside.

Consecrated bread and wine, cleansing water and purifying incense were all part of the multisensorial involvement experienced by Christians when participating in their rituals, especially the core mystery of the Eucharist[85]. Even if all these stimuli were later structured into a more complex liturgy, it is safe to assume their presence in an early stage, as the one testified by the Water Newton Treasure. Indeed, the various vessels would have played a role in enhancing the sacredness evoked by the celebrant. Their precious and shining materials would have sheltered the sacred species and accompanied the ritual from its preparation until its end. Thus, they were essential for the church's functioning, and their presence and ritual activation would have conveyed the sacredness of the space, suitable for the communal encounter with God.

4. The Water Newton Votive Plaques: Conjuring the Divine Presence

The allusion to the divine presence can be linked to the other main group of the Water Newton Treasure: seventeen silver plaques and a golden disc [Figs. 1, 10, 11, 12].

Figure 10. The Amcilla's plaque, Water Newton Treasure, silver, second half or late 4th century CE, British Museum, London, (inv. 1975, 1002.12), source: The British Museum Images © The Trustees of the British Museum

The plaques are triangular with a linear incised or repoussé decoration resembling leaves or feathers, two have traces of gilding, and one can be related to the golden disc [Figs. 1, 11, 12][86].

Figure 11. One of the Chi-Rho inscribed plaques and its related golden disc, Water Newton Treasure, partially gilded silver, gold, second half or late 4th century CE, British Museum, London,

79 Caseau Chevallier, "Odorat, encensement et encensoirs," 436-437, and Béatrice Caseau, "Incense and Fragrances: from House to Church. A Study of the Introduction of Incense in the Early Byzantine Christian Churches," in *Material Culture and Well-being in Byzantium (400-1453)*, ed. Michael Grünbert, Ewald Kislinger, Anna Muthesius and Dionysios Ch. Stathakopulos (Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 76-77.

80 See Caseau, "Incense and Fragrances," 82-85, and Caseau Chevallier, "Odorat, encensement et encensoirs," 436-438.

81 Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 567-573; cf. Caseau Chevallier, "Odorat, encensement et encensoirs," 438-441, and Marco Aimone, "Early Byzantine Silver Censers (Fifth to Seventh Century): General Reflections and Three Case Studies," in *Light and Splendour: Precious Metal as a Medium of Ritual and Social Interaction in Late Antiquity*, ed. Martin A. Guggisberg and Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann (Basel, 2024), 96-106.

82 Caseau Chevallier, "Odorat, encensement et encensoirs," 440; Fricke, "Swinging through Time," 192, 194. For the later liturgical use and symbology associated to censers, see Éric Palazzo, *L'invention chrétienne des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l'art au Moyen Âge*, (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2014), 334-346.

83 Caseau, "Objects in Churches," 572; Caseau Chevallier, "Odorat, encensement et encensoirs," 433-434, 436, 438-440; Fricke, "Swinging through Time," 191-192.

84 Such as sculptures or funerary monuments of saints (*confessiones*), like the one suspended over the tomb of St Peter at the Vatican within the Constantinian donations, cf. Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 110.

85 Béatrice Caseau, "The Senses in Religion: Liturgy, Devotion, and Deprivation," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 95-96.

86 Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 218-222, nos. 205-222. In a Christian context the leaf shape could recall the palm leaf, which was associated with martyrdom, see Dorothy Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (Routledge, 1991), 151.

(inv. 1975, 1002.10-11), source: The British Museum Images © The Trustees of the British Museum

Painter has shown their connection with the pre-Christian tradition of votive plaques, attested widely within the Roman Empire[87]. Once again, Christianization would have implied the inclusion of such practice by re-addressing the donative to the new God, represented by the Chi-Rho symbol appearing on nine plaques and the golden disc [Figs. 1, 10, 11, 12]. Essential to their definitive identification as votives is the dedicatory inscription on one of the largest [Fig. 10][88]. This links them to the vessels with dedicatory inscriptions, further attesting how the treasure was gathered in a sanctuary through communitarian donations. Additionally, Painter highlighted how differences in manufacture and weight between vessels and plaques mirror the social disparities among the donors [Fig. 12][89].

Figure 12. The bowl with Publianus' dedication and one of the Chi-Rho inscribed plaques, Water Newton Treasure, partially gilded silver, second half or late 4th century CE, British Museum, London, (inv. 1975, 1002.5; 1975, 1002.18), source: The British Museum Images © The Trustees of the British Museum

As proposed by Thomas, these donations likely occurred over various years, if not decades, implying that the sanctuary or shrine hosting them was active for a while[90]. This is further supported by the different weight, purity, and state of conservation of the plaques: the most damaged would have likely been exposed the longest within the shrine, thus being more fragile when removed for concealment[91].

Once again, our underlying question arises: What could have been the use of such plaques within the sacred space? We have seen that offering was an essential part of the early Christian ritual, but this was not limited to food collection during the Eucharist. Indeed, other goods and precious votives could be donated too. As recalled by Stephan Heid, official gifting to the altar was conceived as a sort of sacrifice, since the 'property' of the involved goods and objects was transferred to God definitively[92]. Thus, votives were understood as mediators of personal devotion and expression of the link of the donor with the addressed divine being[93].

If the votive function seems clear, understanding their actual exhibition within the church or sacred space is less immediate. Painter proposed a few alternatives starting from the holes pierced on seven plaques: they could have been pinned to a structure, exposed on shelves or other supports, or even presented to the altar and later stored[94]. All these methods were also present in the pre-Christian polytheistic world, and metal plaques were also fixed to a wooden support and hung from beams or tree branches[95]. Due to the close resemblance in the shape, we can imagine a similar display for Water Newton's plaques. Even those with no pin holes could have been glued to some support and possibly exhibited on a shelf, or even suspended. More than one disposition may have coexisted, as demonstrated by the difference in the piercing methods[96]. For instance, the golden disc and its associated plaque were meant to be united back-to-back, thus intended to be visible on both sides [Fig. 11][97]. The votives may have been hung from the ceiling or some branches within the shrine[98], laid on

87 Especially in Britain, see Kenneth S. Painter, "Silver Hoards from Britain in their Late-Roman Context," *Antiquité Tardive. Revue internationale d'histoire et archéologie (IVe-VIIIe s.)*, no. 5 (1997): 98-99. For an overview of Roman polytheistic and early Christian votive plaques, cf. Ernst Künzl, "Römische Tempelschätze und Sakralinventare: Votive, Horte, Beute," *Antiquité Tardive. Revue internationale d'histoire et archéologie (IVe-VIIIe s.)*, no. 5 (1997): 66-68, and Ralph Jackson, "The Ashwell Hoard, Dea Senuna and Comparable Finds from Britain and the Wider Roman World" in *Dea Senuna: Treasure, Cult and Ritual at Ashwell, Hertfordshire*, ed. Ralph Jackson and Gilbert Burleigh (The British Museum, 2018), 132-140.

88 The plaque's inscription reads: *amcilla votum quo[d] promisit conplevit* [trans: *(His) handmaid has paid the vow that she promised*] Tomlin, *Britannia Romana*, 379 no. 12.94. Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 218, 220 no. 207.

89 Due to the different manufacture and quantity/quality of precious metal employed in vessels and plaques, Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 218. Cf. Painter, "Silver Hoards from Britain," 98-99, and Painter, "The Water Newton Silver," 2.

90 Thomas goes further observing how the vessels could have been produced first, already about 325-350 CE, and kept in use while the plaques were gradually cumulating in the shrine, Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 118-119. This view has later been dismissed by Painter, Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 210-211.

91 Thomas recalled that some of the forty silver fragments found in the treasure belonged to some of the surviving plaques – or to others even more damaged when buried. See Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 118-119; cf. Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian*, 19 no. 28.

92 Heid, *Altar and Church*, 207-208.

93 François Baratte, "L'argent et la foi: réflexions sur les trésors de temple," in *Les trésors de sanctuaires de l'Antiquité à l'époque romaine*, ed. Jean-Pierre Calliet, and P. Bazin (Centre de recherche sur l'Antiquité tardive et le haut Moyen Âge – Université Paris X, 1996), 22-23.

94 Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 218.

95 Gina Salapata, "Greek Votive Plaques: Manufacture, Display, Disposal," *BABesch*, no. 77 (2002): 26-31: 29, academia.edu; cf. Jackson, "The Ashwell Hoard, Dea Senuna," 134, and Künzl, "Römische Tempelschätze und Sakralinventare," 66-68.

96 Thomas also highlighted that some pin holes might also be the result of the decorative process, Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 118.

97 Painter, "The Water Newton Treasure," 220 no. 206.

98 Trees held a symbolic value for Christians too and were used in the sacred space decoration. Interesting evidence is the donation of the Emperor Anastasius I (r. 491-514) to the monastery of Qartamin (South-Eastern Turkey), which included two bronze trees meant to hold lamps and votives, see Elbern, "Über die liturgische Kunst," 39-40; and André Grabar, "Quelques observations sur le décor de l'église de Qartāmīn," *Cahiers archéologiques. Fin de l'antiquité et Moyen Âge*, no.

shelves, or pinned to wooden supports. Those with pinholes could have been sewn to textiles, like altar cloths or curtains[99].

In addition to creating a connection between the giver and God, votives displayed tangible signs of divine power[100]. With their presence surrounding the altar, they would have played an indirect role in highlighting the sacredness of the space even without being directly involved in rituals. They would have visually amplified the divine presence evoked during the liturgy, 'reacting' to the effect conveyed by prayer and the vessels during their liturgical use. This would have been even more appropriate in the context of the religious diversity of the 4th and early 5th centuries, helping to maintain the Christian God's primacy over all other cults[101].

5. Conclusions

This overview of the Water Newton Treasure evoked the possible use of the different objects in the 4th- and early-5th-century Christian sacred space. Despite the impossibility of an accurate reconstruction, what is known from coeval written and iconographic sources helps us to grasp an image of their possible functions and the related symbolical associations.

The vessels would have interacted with what is now lost: bread, wine, water, (maybe) incense, and prayers, shifting their nature from profane to sacred. If on the one hand, these objects were charged with a religious value only through the ritual use, on the other, they were crucial for the functioning of the altar space and the performance of the liturgy. In this process, it has been highlighted how adopting practices and shapes may have implied the adaptation of previous meanings to Christianity. Thus, the *cantharus* chalice might have hinted at wine and life-giving properties associated since Antiquity with this shape, linking them to the wine prescribed by Christ in the Last Supper. The hanging bowl allowed us to evoke some pre-Christian purification practices, such as handwashing and incense burning, adjusted to create the proper environment for the encounter with God.

The same applies to the votive plaques, comparable to their polytheistic counterparts except for their addressee. Their presence within the shrine would have endorsed the preeminence of the Christian God by materialising its power and evoking its presence.

The accumulation of vessels and plaques as part of progressive donations by believers would have strengthened their communitarian value and sense of sacredness. As recalled, Thomas highlighted how this occurred over time, stressing the diverse wear shown by the treasure's objects[102]. Therefore, various shapes and decorations may hint not only at different donors but also at different moments of gifting [Fig. 12][103].

We have mostly focused on the interaction of these objects with the altar space and the Eucharist, but they might have been involved in other pivotal rituals for the Christian community. For instance: baptism. We can imagine one of the bowls containing the mixed honey and milk given to the neophytes before their First Communion or even the water for an affusion ritual[104].

Finally, we may follow William H. C. Frend's statement that we have just a part of what could have been the ensemble of implements used by this Christian group[105]. Other objects probably completed the furnishing of the sacred space, made of more perishable or less precious materials, which have not reached us. As we have seen, inventories mention bronze and textiles and recall lighting equipment, containers for storing food and liquids, books, etc[106]. Bronze votives might have flanked the silver plaques, as shown by Roman polytheistic examples[107].

Within this complex picture, what was buried some thousand and five hundred years ago stands out as the selection of this community's most valuable goods, possibly both economically and symbolically. Shining in silver and gold, the repetition of Chi-Rhos echoing between vessels and plaques, these objects would have strengthened the divine presence, evoked through prayers and rituals.

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99 I would like to thank Dr. Richard Hobbs for this suggestion.

100 Daniel Ullucci, "16. Sacrifice and Votives," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro, Juliette J. Day, Rikard Riotto and Richard E. DeMaris (Oxford University Press, 2018), 282-301; cf. Baratte, "L'argent et la foi," 31.

101 This can be securely stated even assuming a peaceful coexistence of the local Christians with believers of different cults, see Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 121; Jackson, "The Ashwell Hoard, Dea Senuna," 139. The practice of offering silver votive plaques continued in the subsequent centuries as demonstrated by later occurrences, like the 6th- to 7th-century findings near Ma'aret en-Noman (Syria), now kept at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and the 7th- or 8th-century plaque found in Hexham (Northumberland) and now at the British Museum, see respectively Mundell Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium*, 240-245, and Jackson, "The Ashwell Hoard, Dea Senuna," 139-140.

102 For instance, the ancient repair of the strainer's handle, the worn surface of the fragmented jug, or the different conservation states of the plaques, see Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 119.

103 I owe this suggestion to Professor Marco Aimone.

104 The affusion ritual implies water being poured from a bowl on the head of the person being baptized. For the different practices of baptism, see Richard E. DeMaris, "22. Water Ritual," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro, Juliette J. Day, Rikard Riotto and Richard E. DeMaris (Oxford University Press, 2018), 391-408. For some specifics about the situation in late Roman Britain, cf. David Petts, "Votive Deposition in Late Roman Britain," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe*, ed. Martin Carver (Boydell and Brewer, 2002), 110-113, and Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 204-206. The use of giving mixed honey and milk to the neophytes is mentioned by Tertullian (160–240 CE), see Heid, *Altar and Church*, pp. 207-208.

105 Frend, "Syrian Parallels," 147. Indeed, it does not seem a chance that all the objects of the treasure are made of silver and/or gold.

106 Cf. Caseau, "Objects in Churches," and Geertman, "L'arredo della ecclesia Cornutianensis".

107 See note 87.

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