

<b>Institution:</b> University of Birmingham		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 28, History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> The Holy Stuff of Holy War: Transforming Knowledge, Awareness and Understanding of the Devotional Material Culture of the Medieval Crusading Movement		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2007–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr William Purkis	Reader in Medieval History	September 2007–present
Dr Rosie Weetch	Research Fellow, <i>Bearers of the Cross (BotC)</i>	November 2015–September 2016
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> October 2015–December 2020 (ongoing)		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>How the Museum of the Order of St John (MOSJ) in London <b>understands, interprets and values its objects and spaces associated with the medieval crusading movement</b> has been transformed through a sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. We have <b>enhanced knowledge of and enabled greater access to MOSJ's medieval collections, changed curatorial practice, improved educational engagement and augmented visitor experience</b>. The changes at MOSJ have had wider international reach, catalysing similar enhancements to collections knowledge and accessibility, professional practice, heritage preservation and interpretation within the Israel Antiquities Authority.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Purkis's research has made a significant contribution to reconceptualising understandings of the medieval crusading movement. Most broadly, he has demonstrated <b>the importance of moving away from study of "The Crusades" as a sequence of discrete military expeditions and towards examination of "crusading" as a normative devotional practice</b> that was closely related to Latin Christian traditions of pilgrimage and monasticism, and inspired by ideals of Christomimesis [RO1, RO2, RO5]. In his most recent work, Purkis has stressed the particular importance of situating crusading as a dramatic expression of Latin Christendom's pronounced enthusiasm for the veneration of sacred matter — and, correspondingly, its profound anxieties about sacred material loss [RO3, RO4, RO6].</p> <p>Purkis argues that as a religious cultural system that prioritised the accumulation of relics and other forms of holy matter, medieval Latin Christianity was shaped by a central tension: the corporeal absence of Christ himself. To gain some measure of sensory engagement with their god-man, medieval devotees were therefore forced to rely on interactions with a variety of objects and places with which he was believed to have had direct contact, such as the instruments of his torture and suffering (e.g. the True Cross), and the sites of his birth, life and death (e.g. the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem), all of which were believed to retain potent traces of his sacred presence [RO1, RO4, RO6]. During the eleventh century, however, as a result of the conquests of the Seljuk Turks, and the collapse of Byzantium's eastern frontier, it is evident that Latins in the West became increasingly paranoid about the prospect of the irreversible loss and destruction of this sacred material culture in the East.</p> <p>Purkis's latest research has thus demonstrated that <b>Latin concerns for the preservation of their devotional objects and spaces was of central importance for triggering crusade enthusiasm</b>, as was manifest in (i) sustained recruitment from 1095 onwards to military campaigns to the eastern</p>		

Mediterranean; (ii) the subsequent establishment and maintenance of custodial colonial lordships in the Holy Land; (iii) the extraction and displacement to the West of substantial quantities of holy matter and (iv) wider patterns of financial and liturgical support for the crusading movement across Latin Christendom during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [RO2, RO3, RO4, RO6]. Most importantly, Purkis's recent attention to the materiality of crusader devotion has led him to challenge the longstanding historiographical trope that crusading was *either* stimulated primarily by worldly "material gain" *or* by idealistic "knightly piety". By way of contrast with both these approaches, Purkis's key research findings [KF] have shown that:

- **KF1:** Sacred material gain was fundamental to crusaders and their contemporaries; and
- **KF2:** The acquisition and possession of holy objects, such as relics, held significance not only for devotional reasons but also for social, political and economic ones too.

In this analytical framework, the interdisciplinary study of crusader material culture (especially objects that depict or were designed to contain sacred matter) takes on a renewed significance — and this was the principal research objective of Purkis's AHRC-funded *Bearers of the Cross* project (*BotC*) and the collaboration with MOSJ. Working collaboratively with MOSJ's curator and a group of museum volunteers from 2015–2016, the *BotC* project team identified, measured and photographed c.1500 objects in MOSJ's medieval collection. They then updated and improved records within MOSJ's internal collections management system and published an [open access database](#) of these fully revised and illustrated object records via the *BotC* website, accompanied by a series of [interpretive essays](#), videos of the project's public engagement activities and an online version of the project's 2017 exhibition [RO3, RO4].

### 3. References to the research

**RO1.** W.J. Purkis, *Crusading Spirituality in the Holy Land and Iberia, c.1095–c.1187* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008). ISBN 9781843833963.

**RO2.** W.J. Purkis, 'Crusading and Crusade Memory in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum*', *Journal of Medieval History* 39:1 (2013), 100–127. DOI: [10.1080/03044181.2012.751551](https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2012.751551)

**RO3.** [BotC project website](#), including MOSJ [medieval collections database](#) by Weetch; [interpretive essays](#) by Purkis and Weetch; and videos of [public lectures](#) by Purkis.

**RO4.** [Holy City, Holy War: Devotion to the Sacred in Crusader Jerusalem exhibition](#) (MOSJ, Sept.–Dec. 2017; published online Oct. 2019), curated by W.J. Purkis with MOSJ's curator.

**RO5.** W.J. Purkis, "Zealous Imitation": The Materiality of the Crusader's Marked Body', *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 14:4 (2018), 438–453. DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2018.1539571](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1539571)

**RO6.** W.J. Purkis, "'Holy Christendom's New Colony': The Extraction of Sacred Matter and the Colonial Status of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem", *The Haskins Society Journal* 30 (2020), 177–211. DOI: [10.1017/9781787449060.009](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787449060.009)

### 4. Details of the impact

**Collections knowledge and accessibility, professional practice, heritage preservation and interpretation at MOSJ** have been enhanced as a result of a sustained collaborative relationship that originated with the *BotC* project. These impacts have transformed how the museum — which is the public-facing hub for the history and heritage of the global humanitarian charity St John International — **understands, interprets and values its medieval objects and spaces**, which amount to one of the most substantial collections of crusader material culture in the world.

#### 1. Greater knowledge and accessibility of MOSJ collections

- a) For the first time since the 1950s, MOSJ fully and accurately understands what it holds in its medieval collections. **Greater knowledge of the precise nature of the museum's medieval collections has been enabled** through the co-production of a new collections database [RO3]. This **knowledge enhancement has fundamentally changed how MOSJ's staff and volunteers understand, value and engage with the museum's objects and spaces** associated with the medieval crusading movement [S1, S2, S3]. MOSJ staff had previously relied on incomplete (and sometimes inaccurate) records within the museum's internal collections

management system, but since its publication in 2016, the *BotC* collections database has effectively superseded the internal system and become a key tool for the day-to-day working of MOSJ's staff. MOSJ's curator has said that since its completion 'the [*BotC*] website — including the open access database, but also interpretative essays, recordings of talks, and blogs — is used daily in my work' [S2]. Recognition of the opportunities that the project's activities presented for MOSJ's volunteers to gain greater knowledge and understanding of the contents of the museum's medieval collections was also shown in 2016, when those who had worked on *BotC* were runners-up in the 'Going the Extra Mile' category at the London Museums Volunteer Awards for their contribution to the production of the *BotC* website and database [S2].

- b) **Heritage professionals, teachers, students and researchers around the world have gained greater physical and digital access** to MOSJ's internationally significant collections as a result of the *BotC* website and database [RO3]. This widened access has **increased the visibility of MOSJ's medieval collections** among a range of new audiences, **led to an unprecedented level of national and international engagement** with MOSJ's collections and forged new working relationships for the museum. Previously, those who wished to explore MOSJ's medieval collections could only do so by visiting the museum in person; now, high-resolution images and detailed records of **hundreds of objects are freely available online**. One researcher in the Archaeological Research Department of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) has noted that, before *BotC*, 'The hidden treasures of the Museum of the Order of St John, London were almost a secret' [S6]. By the end of December 2020, however, the *BotC* website had had more than 15,000 users from more than 130 different countries [S4], and images of objects reproduced from the collections database have been used in a diverse range of books, journal articles, and undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations [S2]. As MOSJ's director puts it, 'The higher level of awareness of the collections resulting from the project is [...] enabling the Museum to forge new relationships that are facilitating further research' [S1]. The Assistant Keeper of Medieval and Modern Coins at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, has attested to the particular importance of the *BotC* website for heritage professionals: 'Being able to access hi-res images and full descriptions of each piece is not only **vital for people working on crusader period numismatics in the UK, but more importantly the collection is now available digitally to the rest of the world**. This is particularly significant for my colleagues working on the Latin East volume of *Medieval European Coinage* who are based in Paris and Jerusalem. If only all crusader collections were so readily accessible' [S5]. On this point, the IAA researcher quoted above has noted that even the IAA does not yet have a comparable resource, and that 'The *BotC* online database, as a resource available to the general public, has set a desired standard for colleagues in the [IAA's] Coin Department' [S6]. The fact that the *BotC* website 'democratises [...] the Museum's medieval collections [...] allowing free access to all teachers and pupils with an internet connection' has also been highlighted by one UK schoolteacher, whose pedagogical practices have been enhanced as a result of the *BotC* project's work: 'Having now discovered the collections, I will plan further lessons around the objects and I am sure my pupils will enjoy the variety of lessons interspersed with the objects and undertaking image analysis' [S7].

## 2. Change to curatorial practice

**Fundamental change in how MOSJ's curatorial staff interpret and display the museum's collections has resulted from the co-production of a new collections database** and close engagement with the *BotC* project and Purkis's research [KF1, KF2; RO1, RO3–RO6]. New interpretation and display strategies have become an embedded feature of the Museum's curatorial practice as a consequence of the deeper understanding of the cultural milieu in which so many of MOSJ's medieval objects were produced. As MOSJ's curator puts it, the museum's generalist staff and volunteers now have '[an] increased confidence with the historic context of these collections' [S2]. Whereas previously MOSJ's medieval gallery displays were static, with the objects exhibited being only of tangential relevance to their associated interpretive text, the medieval displays are now changed on a regular basis to reflect invigorated engagement with and understanding of the collection. In the curator's words, 'Following the success of the 2017 exhibition *Holy City, Holy War* [...] we have been able to move away from interpretation with incidental inclusion of coins, to interpretation that fully engages the visitor with the object' [S2]. Similarly, MOSJ's director has recently published a book entitled *Treasures: Highlights from the Collection of the Museum of the Order of St John* (London, 2019), a new cultural artefact (to which Purkis contributed) that includes

discussion of the museum's medieval objects and draws substantially on knowledge MOSJ staff acquired through the *BotC* project [RO3]. MOSJ's director has stated that 'to be able to unlock the stories behind these objects is incredibly important' and that *BotC* has 'improved the way we can interpret our collections for both a physical and virtual audience' [S4].

### **3. Improved educational engagement resulting from improved understanding of MOSJ's medieval collections and their historical context**

- a) **New and enhanced resources for schools and university groups that bring added value to those studying the history of crusading** have been created. MOSJ Learning & Access staff now have sufficient knowledge about both the specifics of the museum's collections and the underlying aims and impetus for the crusading movement [RO1, RO2–4, RO6] to enable them to develop new resources that speak to the needs of education curricula [S3]. This has generated greater and more productive engagements with visiting families, schools and university groups. According to MOSJ's L&A officer, 'As a direct result of the [*BotC*] project, objects from this period now feature throughout our formal and informal learning programmes' [S3]. More specifically, and with reference to the particular importance to crusaders of sacred spaces and things [KF1, KF2], 'the wider Museum team now has the resources, and the confidence, to put objects such as crusader coins, stone fragments and a model of the Holy Sepulchre centre stage, with students from Key Stage 3 all the way up to undergraduates' [S4]. This is a significant and important change for MOSJ's L&A activities given that 'Christendom, the importance of religion and the Crusades' has been a suggested focus at Key Stage 3 in the UK's History curriculum since 2014, and that there is an evident demand for museum-based and object-focused learning enrichment opportunities from both schools and universities. Having only engaged with a total of 276 students (from 13 separate school and university groups) during the three-year period 2014–16, as a result of the project's resource and knowledge enhancements the numbers have increased by nearly 350%: across the three-year period 2017–19, MOSJ staff engaged with a total of 1,213 students (from 46 separate school and university groups) [S2]. These engagements have in turn **changed the educational and pedagogical practices of lecturers working at various HEIs around the country**, including London, Reading and Manchester. For example, one professor of medieval archaeology at the University of Reading has attested that as a result of the *BotC* project his students are now 'able to see and engage with portable material culture in the Museum collection [...] [which has] significantly improved the experience of the visit' [S8].
- b) **Active engagement with schools across the UK during the substantial and continued educational disruption caused by COVID-19** has been maintained through a set of new online resources co-produced in autumn 2020 by Purkis and the Museum's L&A team. These digital resources have **enabled schools prevented from visiting in person to continue to experience MOSJ's medieval collections**. The *To Jerusalem and Back Again: Objects of the Crusades* resource pack — which includes a 26-slide PowerPoint slideshow, 21 pages of teaching notes and five interactive worksheets, and focuses on the centrality of sacred material culture within the history of crusading [KF1, KF2; RO3, RO4, RO6] — provides History teachers with **new, object-focused ways to teach the Key Stage 3** topic 'Christendom, the importance of religion and the Crusades'. One teacher has commented that the resources have 'very high production values, they contain interesting objects which naturally spark the curiosity of pupils, and they are completely planned and self-contained so that teachers can simply deploy them without the need for additional preparation' [S7]. Showcasing objects from MOSJ's medieval collections, the same teacher notes that the *To Jerusalem and Back Again* resource pack 'points to new ways in teaching the topic' and enables students 'not only to link the medieval crusades to debates in modern history about colonialism by exploring questions of sacred material loss and gain, but also [...] to understand and access the "medieval mindset"' [S7]. Although produced within the context of, and in response to, the pandemic, MOSJ's curator has commented that 'it is a valuable and versatile resource in current times, but also relevant to post-Covid education [...] [and] to rebuilding the Museum's offer and audiences upon resumption of business as usual' [S2].

### **4. Augmented visitor experience**

The broader MOSJ visitor experience has benefited from improved collections accessibility, changed curatorial practice and improved educational engagement, with



MOSJ's visitors noting increased interest in, and curiosity about, the medieval past. In questionnaires distributed after the *BotC* lectures in 2016–17, for example, 93% of respondents (123 out of 132) said that Purkis's talks had 'enhanced their knowledge and understanding of medieval religion' [S9], while one attendee commented that they had heard 'An excellent, informative, detailed and interesting lecture [...] stimulating a drive to investigate the topic further' [S9]. The particular significance of sacred objects and spaces resonated with many of the 8,612 visitors to the 2017 *Holy City, Holy War* exhibition, one of whom wrote that they were 'really intrigued by the tangible examples of what the Holy Sepulchre meant to crusaders and pilgrims — very powerful' [KF1; S9]. More recently, in September 2019, one TripAdvisor reviewer described how much they had enjoyed visiting a 'smartly curated museum' and a 'treasure trove of history', noting that 'The narrative and exhibits are clear, taking visitors through the history of the Order of St John from the crusades, through history to the modern ambulance service' [S4]. Similarly, in November 2019, a visitor from Australia attested to having seen 'Interesting artefacts but the real treasure for me was the well presented stories — absolutely enthralling' [S4].

### **5. International exchange of knowledge, best practice and interpretation of crusader material culture has been stimulated**

**Enhancements to collections knowledge and accessibility, professional practice, heritage preservation and interpretation are being shared internationally** and have been catalysed within the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) as a direct result of Purkis's sustained collaboration with MOSJ and the *BotC* project. The instigation of *Francitecture* — a project that will result in an online database of architectural elements from the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem that are now held in IAA storage facilities — was immediately inspired by the production of the *BotC* website and collections database, as the project's lead researcher explains: '*BotC* [...] directly impacted upon the initiation of *Francitecture* [...] the improved accessibility to the museum in London is a guiding torch when it comes to enhancing the status of the IAA storage facilities as a primary hub for researchers, scholars and the general public.' The same researcher adds that increasing awareness of the IAA's collections among wider audiences (including heritage professionals, teachers, students and researchers around the world) 'now stands as a primary goal for transforming the status of IAA medieval collections [...] The example set by *BotC* illustrates how building an effective public outreach component of a research project can result in this transformation' [S6]. Over the next decade, *Francitecture* project staff will work in consultation with Purkis to draw upon the expertise he gained through working with MOSJ to enhance wider knowledge and understanding of its medieval collections. 'In the current climate of enabling public access to national treasures', the project's lead researcher writes, 'it is our hope that Dr Purkis will be able to contribute his experience to other professionals in the IAA and assist in producing the framework for an equivalent outreach project here' [S6].

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**S1.** Testimonial from the Director of MOSJ

**S2.** Testimonial from the Curator of MOSJ

**S3.** Testimonial from the MOSJ Learning & Access Officer

**S4.** Web pack: [The BotC blog](#), especially posts on [The Impact of Bearers of the Cross at the Museum of the Order of St John](#), [summer volunteering at the Museum of the Order of St John](#) and [cataloguing crusader coins](#); [BotC YouTube video](#); Google Analytics report on *BotC* website traffic; TripAdvisor reviews (all in PDF pack)

**S5.** Testimonial from the Assistant Keeper of Medieval and Modern Coins, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

**S6.** Testimonial from a researcher in the Archaeological Research Department, Israel Antiquities Authority

**S7.** Testimonial from History Teacher (Rugby School)

**S8.** Testimonial from Associate Professor of Archaeology, University of Reading

**S9.** Questionnaires/feedback from *BotC* lectures and *Holy City, Holy War* exhibition, PDF