

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 29 Classics		
Title of case study: Promoting knowledge of art and religion in late antiquity: Empires of Faith		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2013-December 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof. Jaś Elsner	Principal Investigator/Senior Research Fellow in Classical Archaeology and Art	1999-present
Dr Rachel Wood	Postdoctoral researcher /Departmental Lecturer in Classical Archaeology	Sep 2014-present
Dr Dominic Dalglish	Postdoctoral researcher/ Departmental Lecturer in Ancient History	Oct 2015-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2014-July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The <i>Empires of Faith</i> (EOF) project developed new ways that challenge conventional attitudes to the study and exploration of religions. EOF stimulated, shaped, and informed debate about the role of objects in religions in antiquity and today for staff and visitors at the British Museum (BM) and Ashmolean (Ash), and religious communities in Oxford. The research increased awareness and deepened understanding of religions and religious material culture in modern British society and their interconnected cultural histories. EOF significantly informed museum practice, affecting the aims and behaviour of staff, display practice, and research culture at Ash and BM, and facilitated relationships between cultural institutions.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>EOF was a 6-year GBP1,700,000 Leverhulme Trust-funded research programme run between Oxford University and the British Museum from 01/01/13 to 31/12/18. It investigated how images and objects were used to construct and disseminate political and religious forms of authority across South Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean from c.200-800 CE, a formative period in the development of many religions, their iconographies, and their relationships with hegemonic political authorities. The scale and scope of EOF enabled it to explore questions previously hindered by boundaries of academic disciplinary conventions, ranging from India to Ireland, including pagan and Christian art in the Roman and Byzantine empires and northern Europe; early Islamic art; art and Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian Persian empire; and South Asian art [R2, R4, R6].</p> <p>On the basis of this research, EOF proposed and executed a major public exhibition, <i>Imagining the Divine: art and the rise of world religions</i> (ITD), at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (19/10/17-18/2/18, [R1, R5]). To complement ITD, Dominic Dalglish organised a photographic exhibition on modern religious spaces in Oxford, entitled <i>Those Who Follow: In Touch with Religious Diversity in Oxford</i> (TWF) in the Classics Centre, Oxford (16/11/17-20/3/18), and a series of public workshops with members of various religious communities in Oxford. Inspired by the EOF research on comparative approaches, Dalglish also instituted a series of workshops for doctoral students that included a series of joint and comparative presentations to the public in the ITD exhibition space entitled <i>Talking Religion</i>. To augment ITD, Rachel Wood oversaw the creation of a 3D model of a famous and unparalleled Persian artefact, the Khosro Cup, using the latest advances in digital imaging technologies [R3]. The original artefact cannot legally travel from Paris and is in storage until at least 2022, so this work</p>		

incorporated into the ITD exhibition, in an eye-catching manner, a culture whose historical importance has been neglected in modern presentations due to the fragility, scarceness, and immobility of its material remains.

EOF built on recent advancements in comparative research on the Roman, Iranian, and Islamic worlds, and incorporated South Asia and Europe into the picture, demonstrating the fluid relationships and interactions between different cultures and religions [R1, R2, R4, R6]. Similarly innovative was the attempt to place material culture at the heart of the discussion [R5], acknowledging visual evidence's centrality to religious experience and the construction of political and religious authority in late antiquity. EOF's key findings illuminated the complexities and methodological problems in conducting comparative study of religious objects, particularly in light of the pervasiveness of Eurocentric and Christian-focused interpretative frameworks, showing how new iconographies and relationships forged between religion and state in late antiquity still play a part in 21st-century attitudes to religion and society.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1. [Exhibition, catalogue available on request] J. Elsner., S. Lenk et al. (2017), *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.
- R2. [Authored Book, available on request] P. Adrych, R. Bracey, D. Dalglish, S. Lenk, & R. Wood (2017), *Images of Mithra*, Visual Conversations in Art & Archaeology 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780198792536.
- R3. [Edited Book, Open Access] K. Kelley, & R. Wood (2018 eds), *Digital imaging of artefacts: developments in methods and aims*, Oxford, Archaeopress. ISBN 9781789690262 (e-PDF). <https://www.archaeopress.com/ArchaeopressShop/Public/download.asp?id={8D9EF384-81C9-4C18-9F9D-398102B81B4A}>
- R4. [Edited Book, available on request] J. Elsner (2020, ed.), *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9781108473071.
- R5. [Journal Article] J. Elsner (2018), 'Exhibitions and the Formation of Knowledge.', *Know: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 2(2), 321-340. DOI: [10.1086/699008](https://doi.org/10.1086/699008)
- R6. [COVID-delayed publication] J. Elsner & R. Wood (forthcoming 2021, eds), *Imagining the Divine: Art in Religions of Late Antiquity across Eurasia*, London (British Museum Press).

Grant:

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4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

1. Changing public understanding of religions

EOF's research **stimulated and informed public debate around the role of art and objects in religions**, especially regarding various religions' cultural history and the legacies of those histories, most notably through the *Imagining the Divine: art and the rise of world religions* (ITD) exhibition, which drew 22,902 visitors from 19/10/17–18/2/18 [R1; E2.1]. It is notoriously difficult to attract visitors to exhibitions on religious, archaeological, and comparative topics, so this number demonstrates particular success (for comparison, the two previous archaeological exhibitions at the Ashmolean brought in 13,306 and 22,156) [E2.1]. While illustrating the longevity of multi-culturalism and cultural interactions, EOF's research encouraged increased understanding through sympathetic communication of issues surrounding religious culture. Roughly 65% of visitors to ITD perceived the religions as more connected following their visit to the exhibition, and 40% said their opinion of the religions had changed [E2.1]. Of *Those Who Follow* (TWF) workshop participants, 93% said they felt better informed about the art and/or visual history of religious communities other than their own after visiting ITD; 70% said they felt religious art and/or visual culture is more important after their visit to the exhibition [E3].

The TWF exhibition informed visitors' understanding and appreciation of contemporary religious spaces in Oxford and the city's religious diversity. Workshop participants felt more engaged with their city's communities and physical spaces: 'I feel my eyes have been opened to

a much wider array of religious contexts'; 'The photos were an excellent way to generate discussion about religious spaces, communities and practices in Oxford' [E3.1b]. 98% of those surveyed said they felt they knew more about the religious buildings and spaces of Oxford, and 74% said they felt better informed about religious communities more generally, as a result of TWF [E3.1a].

Beyond the direct visitors to ITD and readers of the accompanying catalogue (2,358 copies sold, as of 03/20) [R1; E4]), the exhibition **stimulated discussion** through featuring in the national press [E5] and radio, including BBC Radio 4's *Sunday* (22/10/2017). ITD prompted an article in *The Guardian* on personal responses to religious objects featured in the exhibition, including contributions by Rowan Williams, Mary Beard, Vishvapani Blomfield, and Julia Neuberger [E5.12]. EOF hosted and organised numerous associated events, including a high-profile free public conversation between Mary Beard and Neil MacGregor (Sheldonian Theatre 17/01/18, full at 800 attendees and live-streamed) [E6; E7]. Online presence (especially via EOF's website and social media platforms, and pages on the BM website) widened engagement with these activities and deepened public understanding through lively and thoughtful blog posts, enabling engagement with a worldwide audience [E7]. One EOF blog reader in the US commented, 'My sister's grandchildren are Buddhist...this essay has been very influential in determining my desire to understand these two young children and their differences in education and religious background' [E7.2].

Through ITD and the associated activities, EOF's research also contributed to **the development of cultural tourism and contributed to the quality of the tourist experience**. The *Talking Religion* series (TR) and other public gallery talks in the Ashmolean and the BM given by the EOF team engaged audiences' attention more closely with the research [E6]. Based on EOF's research methodology [R1; R2; R4], *Talking Religion's* comparative thematic format of joint presentations based on details of individual objects conveyed the messages in innovative ways to better develop visitors' cultural understanding and enrich their experience of the displays (58% of attendees surveyed rated their talk 'Excellent' and 42% 'Good', and 100% said they would be interested in attending another talk like this. 580 attended.) [E8, E1.2, E11.2].

2. Educating visitors and local communities on the interconnectedness of different religions' histories

ITD took the bold step of placing five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) alongside each other, in the same space, to stimulate awareness and discussion of the interconnected cultural histories of these religions, many of whose adherents today belong to marginalised and diverse audiences in British society [R1]. TR amplified the comparative aspect through direct public presentations and juxtapositions to deepen the public's engagement [E8]. EOF's research thus initiated and facilitated inter-faith discussions for Ashmolean visitors ('The religions are more connected than I had thought'; 'We realised how the religions' art is linked and how nearby religions are to each other'; and 'I didn't know how related all the imagery was, and how much we had borrowed from one another' [E2.3].

Associated events built on this inter-faith aspect of EOF's research, enlarging the discussion around the exhibition to engage directly with contemporary issues of inter-faith relations, specifically to communities in Oxford: for example, the panel discussion *Me and My Beliefs: Challenges of Identity and Society* between Elsner, Rt. Revd Libby Lane, and Councillor Shaista Aziz (28/11/17, 70 attendees); and The OneWorld Festival. This weekend event was the idea of EOF, providing the Ashmolean with materials to host a public event connected to ITD, showing how light, music, and food connects different religious communities in order to engage a broader public audience in comparative religious themes and showcase Oxford's religious diversity. The event involved working with The Oxford Civic Society, Oxford Council of Faith, Oxford Foundation Interfaith Group, The Hindu Temple Community, Oxford Buddhist Centre, Oxfordshire Chinese Community and Advice Centre, Oxford Jewish Congregation, The Sikh Community, University Church of St Mary the Virgin, the Sudanese Sufi Community and more (220 participants, 10 volunteers, 14 different faith groups, and 6,904 visitors) [E11]. The event was such a success that it was repeated in 2018 and 2019.

TWF workshops (17/2/18 & 18/2/18) gathered members of the public (those of faith and of none) to discuss personal responses to sacred spaces and religious objects, as inspired or prompted by their reactions to the ITD and TWF exhibitions [E3]. Participants commented on

how these workshops helped to bridge the divide between research and community life in Oxford and encourage awareness of the city's diversity and a sense of belonging: 'Marvellous and thought-provoking exhibition which made me re-think my experience of living in Oxford and the communities around me' [E3.2]. The inter-faith dialogue included members of under-represented groups (Bahá'í; Buddhist; Hindu; Jewish; Quaker; Muslim; as well as Christian, agnostic, and atheist): 'it helped me to understand how these spaces affect different people and how the contents really make the space specific (or not) to 1 religion' (53); 'I now have a better sense of both history and modern worship' (39); 'I have a better understanding of the religions diversity in the city' (29); 'I know more about other religions but mostly I see now that they have much more in common than what I thought' (17). Comments show participants felt their attitudes were changed through engagement with the research, including: 'Greater sensitivity to the variety of religions practice within Oxford and the world' (44); 'feeling that the religious spaces of Oxford are a little more open to me' (48) [E3]. 74% intended to visit some of the featured spaces due to the exhibition.

3. Informing museum practice in the Ashmolean and British Museum

EOF's research resulted in the uptake of innovative methods for presenting artefacts with cultural significance, enhancing the interpretation and communication of powerful narratives to a wider public audience. Collaboration with museum staff at the Ashmolean, BM and other institutions (such as object lenders to ITD), resulted in **enhancements to cultural heritage preservation and interpretation**, including museum and gallery exhibitions, particularly influencing BM and Ashmolean staff and visitors. EOF's success demonstrated the potential for humanities research projects of this size and ambition to affect modes of practice within cultural institutions such as the BM and Ash [E9; E1.3, E1.4, E1.5].

At the BM, EOF research changed the way curatorial staff think about making comparisons and exploring 'global' stories with objects, and has **affected how the British Museum goes about examining its core purpose as a world museum**, promoting world histories, decentring the Mediterranean, and displaying collections in new ways that emphasise global narratives and links between cultures [E9.1]. The BM's Head of Research remarked that EOF research 'informed the choice of objects, narratives and interpretation in two new British Museum permanent displays: the South Asia Galleries that opened in 2017 and the Islamic World Galleries that opened in 2018. In both galleries, issues of the development and interpretation of religious iconography and material culture were directly influenced by the work of Empire's researchers' [E9.1]. The methodology forwarded by the project's research – of interdisciplinary and inter-departmental discussion creating substantive cross-cultural studies – informed the plans for major reformulation of the BM's galleries along comparative and global themes; gave the BM confidence to begin planning a major future exhibition on the Silk Routes with a late antiquity focus and addressing religious issues; and led to the application for the ERC-funded *Beyond Boundaries* project. EOF's research also directly informed the BM exhibition, *Living With Gods* [E9.2] and its international touring exhibition *India and the World* in Mumbai (2017) and New Delhi (2018), which attracted 225,000 visitors and facilitated relationships between the BM and external partners [E9.1]. EOF's work markedly developed the relationship between the BM and Ash, encouraging the BM to support this key UK regional partner through loans for ITD and financial support for its catalogue [R1; E1.1; E9.1].

The Director of Ash affirmed that EOF research changed 'the nature of our museum's major exhibition programme; the way in which exhibitions are conceived and developed; the way in which the Museum engages with the wider academic community within Oxford and beyond and the ways in which we engage the wider public with research...and as such established a model of working with academic partners that has or is being followed in subsequent exhibitions' [E1.1]. EOF's research engaged the support of the Ruddock Foundation for the Arts for the ITD exhibition, who are now regular supporters of Ash's ancient world exhibition programme [E1.1]. Enthusiastic public participation and extremely positive feedback for the *Talking Religion* series of comparative presentations resulted in Ash instituting the comparative model as an annual scheme [E8; E1.2, E1.3].

EOF's research also affected museum practice in Ash by creating a 3D-printed model of the Khosro Cup for ITD using the latest technologies in 3D-printing and display and thereby **produced a new cultural artefact** for Ash's Cast Gallery, broadening its historical, technological, and aesthetic scope [E1.1, E1.6; E10]. The project was developed in response to

an offer by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), thus simultaneously brokering professional exchange **relationships between British and European cultural institutions** and 'contributed to build the basis on which the Department of Coins, Medals and Antiques developed its 3D imaging policy' [E1.7]. The Khosro Cup and Persian heritage were also brought to wider public attention through open access research publication, videos on YouTube (960 views), the online digital model (393 views), and its addition to the BnF's digital collection [R3; E10.3, E10.4]. By using the latest scanning and printing technologies to convey scale, shape, tactility, and reflective and translucent qualities of the original, the model engaged visitors' imaginations and **helped change attitudes to and knowledge of using 3D printing technology in a cultural heritage setting** (85% of survey sample) [E10]. The model has been requested for loan by the Reitberg Museum in Zurich, demonstrating impact on that museum's exhibition planning and relationship with Ash [E1.1, E1.6].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1: Selected Testimonials

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|---|---|
| 1.1 Director, Ashmolean Museum | 1.5 Curator of the Byzantine World, BM |
| 1.2 <i>Talking Sense</i> Director | 1.6 Keeper of the Cast Gallery, Ashmolean |
| 1.3 Former Teaching Curator, Ashmolean | 1.7 Director of the Department of Coins, Medals and Antiques, BnF |
| 1.4 Weston Curator of Roman Britain, BM | |

E2: Ashmolean Museum's *Imagining the Divine* analytics

- 2.1 *Imagining the Divine* Exhibition Summary
- 2.2 *Imagining the Divine* Exhibition Exit Survey
- 2.3 *Imagining the Divine* Ashmolean visitor feedback

E3: Those Who Follow surveys and analysis

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|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 3.1a TWF survey analysis | 3.2 TWF guest book transcript |
| 3.1b TWF participant surveys | 3.3 TWF review |

E4: *Imagining the Divine* - catalogue sales

E5: Selection of articles on *Imagining the Divine*, national and regional press

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|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 5.1 <i>Asian Art</i> | 5.8 <i>The Church Times</i> |
| 5.2 <i>The Sunday Times</i> (Culture) | 5.9 <i>Oxford Times</i> |
| 5.3 <i>Catholic Herald</i> | 5.10 <i>Oxford Times</i> |
| 5.4 <i>Art Quarterly</i> | 5.11 British Library blog |
| 5.6 <i>BBC History Magazine</i> | 5.12 <i>The Guardian</i> |
| 5.7 Diocese of Oxford blog | 5.13 Twitter search for ITD |

E6: List of the Empires of Faith (EOF) team's public talks

E7: Empires of Faith (EOF) online presence

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|---------------------------------|--|
| 7.1 EOF.com blog screenshot | 7.6 EOF Twitter account |
| 7.2 Blog comment | 7.7 Podcast hits for ITD events |
| 7.3 Blog Feedback | 7.8 Streaming stats - Mithra book launch |
| 7.4 BM EOF webpage data 2012-18 | 7.9 Streaming stats - Me and My Beliefs |
| 7.5 EOF Facebook page | |

E8: Talking Religion survey excerpts

E9: Selected Testimonials

- 9.1 Testimonial from Head of Research at the British Museum;
- 9.2 Final report from The British Museum to the Leverhulme Trust

E10: Khosro Cup Replication Project survey and online presence

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|--------------------------|---|
| 10.1 KCRP visitor survey | 10.3 KCRP Sketchfab screenshot 15.03.20 |
| 10.2 KCRP surveys | 10.4 KCRP YouTube screenshot 15.03.20 |

E11: List of associated *Imagining the Divine* events including numbers of attendees

- 11.1 *Imagining the Divine* events
- 11.2 Ashmolean summary of ITD public engagement events