

**BRITISH MUSEUM: A GUIDE TO  
THE EARLY CHRISTIAN AND  
BYZANTINE ANTIQUITIES IN THE  
DEPARTMENT OF BRITISH AND  
MEDIAEVAL ANTIQUITIES**

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**O. M. DALTON**

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PLATE I. LEAF OF A BYZANTINE IVORY DIPTYCH: THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL.  
(See p. 66.)

BRITISH MUSEUM-

A GUIDE TO THE EARLY  
CHRISTIAN AND BYZANTINE  
ANTIQUITIES

IN THE DEPARTMENT OF BRITISH  
AND MEDIÆVAL ANTIQUITIES

WITH FIFTEEN PLATES AND EIGHTY-FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

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## PREFACE

THE collection of objects exhibited in the Christian Room may be divided into three sections: the first, Early Christian; the second, Byzantine; and the third comprising devotional and ecclesiastical objects from various Christian Churches of the East. The period illustrated by the first section is here placed between the beginning of our era and the seventh century; the Celtic and Teutonic Christian remains in the Museum, most of which are assigned to a subsequent date, being reserved for future treatment in other Guides to be issued by the Department. The second section is concerned with the entire duration of the Byzantine Empire, down to its overthrow by the Turks in 1453. The third is at present illustrated by the later Coptic, Abyssinian, and Russian series, but is still very incomplete. Nearly all the objects falling within the first and third of these sections are either directly connected with church worship or have upon them symbols, figures, or inscriptions connecting them with the Christian religion. But with those which illustrate the second this is not always the case, for although a very large number of Byzantine antiquities are ornamented with religious subjects, this is not an invariable rule, a certain proportion having no evident connexion with Christianity. The inclusion of such objects must be defended on the ground that they are of greater archaeological interest in association with obviously Christian work of the same origin than they would be if separated and placed among the collections illustrating the Middle Ages in the West. It is another question whether the Christian and Mediaeval Rooms should not adjoin each other;



in that case all such difficulties might be readily solved. But the present Guide must necessarily deal with things as they are, rather than with things as they might be if more ample space could be obtained.

A collection brought together in so small a place as the Christian Room cannot of course make any claim to completeness. The different sections which it comprises are unevenly represented; it is weak in sculpture and large objects generally; and an ecclesiastical series from the Eastern Churches has really still to be formed. Nor does the room contain all the antiquities of the Early Christian and Byzantine periods in the Museum. The Department of Manuscripts has the MSS. and seals; the Department of Coins and Medals the Byzantine coins; and the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities a number of Christian antiquities from Egypt. Such a separation of objects which are historically closely connected is unavoidable in an institution with so many departments as the British Museum. Exigencies of space and arrangement have made it impossible even to keep together in one room all the objects with which the Guide has actually to deal. The few Christian remains dating from the time of the Roman occupation of Britain are exhibited in the Romano-British Collection; the ivory carvings remain for purposes of comparison in the large series in the Mediaeval Room; two interesting vases are in the collections illustrating the historical development of glass in the Glass and Ceramic Room; while a number of gold rings and jewels are placed for greater security in the Gold Ornament Room and the corridor leading to it. But the inconvenience thus caused to visitors has to some extent been obviated by the exhibition in the Christian Room of reproductions and casts which will aid in the recognition of the originals in the other rooms. Yet with all its deficiencies the collection remains one of extreme interest; and the silver treasures and series of engraved gems and gilded glasses are among the most notable of their kind.

A word must be said in conclusion on the length of the introduction compared with the actual description of the objects. It was felt that some general account of Early

Christian and Byzantine antiquities, and of the historical conditions which produced them, was indispensable if the collection was to arouse the interest it deserved; and for this reason a few remarks upon architecture and upon the ritual of existing Eastern Churches could not be omitted. The introduction is intended to bring a few fundamental facts of Early Christian and Byzantine archaeology to the notice of those approaching the subject for the first time, and thus enable them to proceed to the study of more comprehensive handbooks. This Guide has been written by Mr. O. M. Dalton, the senior assistant in the Department, who also prepared the Catalogue of the collection. Much useful help in the preparation of the introduction has been rendered by Mr. E. A. Wallis Budge in relation to the Copts and Abyssinians, and by Mr. Henry Jenner upon points of ecclesiastical history and ceremony. The Trustees of the British Museum have to thank Mrs. Theodore Bent for permission to reproduce figs. 65 and 68, and the Society of Antiquaries of London for the loan of the blocks of figs. 22 and 47.

The numbers in brackets throughout refer to the *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East*, published by order of the Trustees in 1901.

CHARLES H. READ.

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