The Ritual Economy at Consecratory Festivals in Late Antiquity

Festivals for the consecration of churches were major events in late antiquity that gathered individuals together in large numbers from wide geographic regions and various stations in life. At these festivals, the church building itself and votive gifts would be offered up to God and saints, while on the ground commerce would take place in tents set up surrounding the newly-built or renovated ritual space. This paper examines such festivals as sites of exchange. It identifies the rules of the ritual economy by analyzing speeches and hymns performed on these occasions. It will be shown that the ritual economy differed from other types of economies in the matter of re-gifting as a valued practice. This difference accounts for problems that arose in late antiquity regarding the disposal of ecclesial wealth for charitable purposes.

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