

Jesus' Sandals as a concretion of humility: A Semiotic Analysis from the Carolingian Era to Contemporary Walmart Sales

Les sandales de Jésus en tant que concrétion d'humilité :
une analyse sémiotique allant de l'ère carolingienne à
Walmart

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URL : <https://www.unilim.fr/visible/854>

DOI : 10.25965/visible.854

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Abstract: This study employs Peirce's notion of *habit* to study the transformation of the so-called "Jesus sandals" from revered religious artifacts into contemporary fashion statements. In this context, the doxastic repository of humility serves as a mechanism for both validating and modifying established norms, thereby fostering discourse surrounding emerging aesthetic frameworks associated with self-aware symbols of defiance. This perspective provides significant insights into the evolution of religious symbols of sanctity, highlighting how practices once complementary to official doctrine have been redefined and adapted in response to changing cultural and social contexts.

Résumé : L'évolution des sandales communément appelées de Jésus représente une illustration saisissante de la transformation des symboles culturels et religieux associés à la sainteté. Cette recherche s'inscrit dans le cadre de l'analyse de la notion d'*habit* selon Peirce, afin d'explorer la métamorphose des sandales de Jésus, qui passent d'artefacts religieux sacrés à des affirmations de mode contemporaines. Dans ce contexte, le réservoir doxastique de l'humilité fonctionne comme un mécanisme tant pour valider que pour modifier les normes établies, favorisant ainsi un discours autour des nouveaux cadres esthétiques associés à un symbole ludique et conscient de défi. Cette perspective offre des aperçus significatifs sur l'évolution des symboles religieux de sainteté, soulignant comment les pratiques qui étaient autrefois complémentaires à la doctrine officielle ont été redéfinies et adaptées en réponse aux contextes culturels et sociaux évolutifs.

Mots clés : relique, habit, hippie, humilité, normativité

1. Introduction

The evolution of the so-called Jesus' sandals¹, from their practical application in ancient Roman society to their emblematic function within contemporary subcultures, presents a fascinating example of the transformation of cultural and religious symbols of sanctity. Initially conceived as a rudimentary type of footwear during the Roman era, the sandals acquired religious significance through their association with biblical figures, most notably Jesus Christ. Within the New Testament, sandals serve

as symbols of humility, preparedness, and sacred interactions—evident in Jesus' directives to his disciples (Mark 6:9) and Moses' encounter with God (Acts 7:33)². Jesus' sandals are notably regarded as one of the most significant relics esteemed by the Catholic Church; originally bestowed upon Prüm Abbey by Pepin the Short, they have also come to symbolize, through biblical interpretation, a vital component of Christian identity, with *humility* acknowledged as a foundational principle. However, these symbolic intricacies are secondary phenomena that depend on the intrinsic dynamics associated with relics: specifically, their *indexical* nature. In contrast to images, which can be distinguished based on qualitative characteristics, relics exist as corporeal entities in precisely the same way as the body they signify. As will be elucidated, this framework situates the relic of the sandals at the core of the Christian *semiosphere* (Lotman, 1985), functioning as an aesthetic norm for the interpretation of other interconnected texts, whether through *indexicality*, *iconicity*, or *symbolicity*. Consequently, they facilitate an analysis of practices that complemented official doctrine yet remained peripheral to it, resonating with Guibert of Nogent's depiction of such elements as "practiced but not taught" (Nogent, 1993, pp. 85–7). These tokens occasionally enhanced the formal authority of secular leaders while often bypassing ecclesiastical institutions, serving as vital indicators of how Christians navigated their faith and as markers of deeply entrenched cultural norms, usually depicted as integral components of the "performative attire" associated with biblical personages. By the 1960s and 70s, a cultural metamorphosis occurred, wherein these sandals became emblematic of countercultural movements, and most notably within the Hippie Community. This shift marked the beginning of the sandals'

1 The designation "Jesus sandals" has been adopted to refer to a specific style of sandal that is commonly recognized in American English. This style is characterized by its minimalist aesthetic. It is crafted from natural, unadorned leather, typically exhibiting a raw, earthy finish or being subtly oiled to accentuate the material's textured grain. The straps are generally wide and curved, designed to envelop the foot straightforwardly, frequently crossing over the instep or fastening around the ankle with basic buckles or ties, intentionally eschewing superfluous decorations. The leather straps may be braided or looped, resulting in a harmonious blend of aesthetic unity and practical design that facilitates a snug fit while preserving an open and breathable structure. In modern adaptations, these sandals may feature subtle enhancements such as cushioned soles for increased comfort or variations in color; however, the fundamental design remains unaltered. Hand-stitched edges on the soles may further underscore the artisanal quality of these sandals, evoking a sense of revival in ancient craftsmanship.

2 The motif of sandals appears in both the Old and New Testaments as a symbol of divine instruction and reverence. In Mark 6:9, Jesus instructs His disciples to "*wear sandals but not an extra shirt*" as they go out to preach, emphasizing simplicity, readiness, and reliance on God rather than material provisions. Similarly, in Acts 7:33, Stephen recounts Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, where God commands Moses, "*Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*" This reference, drawn from Exodus 3:5, is cited in Acts, a New Testament book chronicling the early Christian church. Here, the removal of sandals signifies reverence in the presence of divine holiness. See *The Holy Bible New international version*, 1973. <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/new-international-version-niv-bible/#copy>

transformation into a symbol of nonconformity and alternative identity. Fast forward to the 21st century, the once-revered Jesus sandals have entered the domain of the consumer culture in an ironic twist, most remarkably at large retailers such as Walmart and specialized online stores like the Holy Land Shop.

The article is organized into three principal sections: *firstly*, it analyzes how commonplace objects, such as sandals, were elevated to sacred relics during the Carolingian dynasty, underscoring their symbolic authority in legitimizing political power and acting as a concretion of Christian identity. *Secondly*, complementing the reflection on the waning significance of religious relics as instruments of normativity, it will be examined how the association of these sandals with Jesus has become interwoven into collective memory, emphasizing their evolution from symbols of religious veneration to emblems of counterculture. *Lastly*, the article investigates the phenomenon of “brand marketing” by scrutinizing the controversies surrounding fashion-based identity in the United States. Walmart, for instance, markets sandals as “leather Jesus sandals” that provide a “timeless style and custom fit”, while the Holy Land Shop presents them as “biblical sandals” that embody “the simplicity of ancient times”. This juxtaposition highlights the sandals' new role as a playful, self-aware symbol of defiance.

By engaging with Peirce's notion of *habit*³, this study probes the complex transformation of Jesus' sandals from revered religious artifacts to modern fashion statements, far from the constraints imposed by the inappropriate intellectual dichotomy of secularism. From diverse perspectives, the norm of “humility” functions as a mechanism for validating or altering established norms, thereby inciting discourse on an emerging aesthetic framework linked to *postmodern emotivism* (Macyintire, 1981). In the sense that fashion symbols of defiance might eventually embody the tenets of postmodern emotivism by privileging individual emotional expression and subjective identity over established cultural norms and universal value systems. I believe this case study offers a glimpse into how cultural practices that have historically complemented but were not central to official doctrine are being reintegrated and re-thematized in contemporary subcultures, thus providing valuable insights into the evolution of religious symbols of sanctity.

2. Jesus' sandals as a figure of Christ: embracing normativity through metaphorization

The semiotics of Jesus' sandals must be explored first through their transformation from a simple pair of footwear into a powerful religious relic. This process speaks to the evolving cultural and symbolic meanings attached to material objects. In this section, I shall demonstrate that the sandals of Christ turn out to be associated with one of the Carolingian dynasty's first steps towards building a divinely established ecclesia, and I shall bring scriptural exegesis to bear on questions of Carolingian political culture and its biblical pedigree. This perspective aims to illuminate the complex interactions in which

3 On *Habit* in Peirce and the pragmatist tradition, see: West D. M., & West D., (eds.) (2016).

the Jesus' relic appears not only as an instrument of political authority and communication but also as an embodiment of Christian identity, ultimately contributing to the codified themes associated with the "figure"⁴ of Christ. As will be discussed, the discourse concerning Jesus' sandals ultimately solidified around specific foundational attributes, evolving into a symbol that embodies essential Christian values, with humility identified as a core principle. However, these symbolic nuances are secondary phenomena that rely on the fundamental dynamics inherent to relics: namely, their indexical nature. Unlike images, which can be differentiated based on qualitative attributes, relics are distinguished in strictly quantitative terms: a relic exists as a body in precisely the same manner as the body it represents. As Massimo Leone elucidates, the semiotic significance of relics is fundamentally contingent upon their physical proximity to the body over a specified duration (Leone, 2014, pp. 54-55). As such, a relic is *ontologically* distinct from mere representations or images; it transcends being a simple indicator of divine presence and functions as a tangible physical embodiment of such presence, with each fragment encapsulating the essence of the departed individual—*pars pro toto*—in its entirety. Further extending this framework, Christina Hahn characterizes relics not simply as sacred material but also as social phenomena, serving as "barometers of Christian devotion and its processes" (Hahn, 2020, p. 5). This perspective is strikingly significant, as while some theologians interpret the Body of Christ symbolically, others embrace a more literal or mystical interpretation. In the Pauline epistles, the term Body of Christ indexically extends to "those who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, believed in him, and were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13), "who are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22), and "who are joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped; when each part is working properly, it enables the body to grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:16).⁵

To achieve a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, I turn to the semiotic framework developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), which allows for an interpretation of the sandals within a continuum depending on a specific set of relationships with both interpretant and object (CP 1890:1.390; CP 1911:MS 674; West, 2019). This theoretical approach encourages to view the sandals through an interpretative lens, linking the sandals to the individual's societal context and the broader society where the act of interpretation occurs, especially when this takes place in an epoch far removed from the original context. As a result, we encounter both a subjective and socially embedded process, in which individual perception interacts with collective cultural meanings. In this perspective, the relic may be defined as a tangible manifestation of memory, with the sandals evolving into a "figure of Christ," whose significance, when invoked, can suddenly become an accessible symbol of humility across time.

4 On « figure » see Greimas in Fabbri ; Marrone 2002, pp. 196-210.

5 See: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%201&version=NIV>

As Paolo Bertetti traces, within the framework of generative semiotics, an element within a text constitutes a "figure" if it corresponds to a counterpart in the natural world, which denotes the realm of sensory experience that is thoroughly organized and culturally imbued. Nevertheless, a figure should not merely be regarded as an "object" belonging to its referential domain; it emerges from perception but is fundamentally a cultural construct that has been organized semiotically (Bertetti, 2017, p. 89). A similar issue re-emerges in the works of Ferraro, who posits that that figures do not reside merely at the level of textual content but are primarily signifiers within a relational framework where the sign constitutes an "immaterial cultural entity capable of manifesting in diverse forms and substances throughout texts" (Ferraro, 2006 in Bertetti, 2017, p. 93). In the framework of this analysis, I believe it is imperative to acknowledge the significance of metaphorization⁶ through figures, particularly the recurrent thematization of sandals as symbols of humility. This phenomenon may be understood as a "discursive substitution mechanism," in which a particular object or figure, such as sandals, embodies a shared attribute across diverse contexts and representations. The common sense that unifies these representations is humility, thus manifesting as a distinct isotopy within discursive semantics. In other words, when employed effectively, this metaphor transforms into a law (or symbol) of a discursive fact—a shared cultural element—bridging disparate ideological realms that span from Christian spirituality to alternative lifestyles characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s.

With regards to this point, within Christian tradition, sandals are frequently associated with figures such as Jesus and other « holy » individuals, symbolizing their ascetic lifestyle and humble service to humanity. Similarly, in filmic depictions of Christ or saints, the simple sandals underscore the spiritual humility of the character, embodying a profound connection to the earth while rejecting material excess. Moreover, within the context of the hippie subculture—which often sought to repudiate societal materialism and embrace a more spiritually grounded existence—sandals became emblematic of anti-consumerist values and the quest for authenticity. In these contexts, sandals transcend their role as mere accessories; they become signifiers of humility that are both historically and culturally contextualized, thus carrying an enduring resonance. As such, the metaphor of humility is inclined to provoke a specific array of interpretations on a meta-level, hence orienting discursive organization according to the form of interaction prescribed.

This case study exemplifies how the metaphorical depiction of humility is inscribed and gains significance through *habit*: humility is expressed through figurative language, which enables a sophisticated isotopic interaction between different texts and sign dynamics, while concurrently hierarchically covering the stylistic particularities of each, unique pair of sandals (Greimas and Courtés, 1974, p. 142; cf. Bertetti, 2017, pp. 94-95). As will be elucidated further, the association between Jesus and the sandals as a "sign of humility" has been perpetuated through cultural artifacts (such as rites and

⁶ On metaphor see also Eco, 2008.

monuments) and institutional discourse (theological exegesis), whose ultimate relevance depends on situated practices associated with a form of habit change (West, 2019, pp. 1-2) that continually updates itself, ultimately illustrating how indexes are foundational to inference making: "Indexes serve as a path-finder function, showing where to situate events within a sequential logical framework, informing the abducer how to proceed from consequences to premises and from one premise to another" (ibid.). Consequently, the insights derived from each contextual self-*description*⁷—that constrain the potentially boundless interpretation—enable abductors to traverse interpretative pathways within given constraints, ultimately fostering the development of new meanings (West, 2019, pp. 1-2). That said, in particular contexts, this update has the potential to expand significantly and acquire greater nuance; nonetheless, it continues to be anchored in specific foundational attributes that fundamentally rely on a core metaphorical framework, regardless of whether those who employ the sign would agree with the original assessment. These biases arise from an individual's relationship with a "normative (mythological) structure" (i.e., the metaphor) that fosters a coherent value system and differentiations that organize the cultural landscape of knowledge (and belief) (Lotman, 1990, p. 162). As such, texts can be categorized as significant versus insignificant and central versus peripheral based on their functions in representing and perpetuating this normative bias, which consistently relates to itself in current and pertinent contexts (Assmann, 1995, p. 131). Herein, it could be argued that a non-coercive yet uniformizing function characterizes this organizational and structuring capacity of this aesthetic force⁸: it serves not only as a guideline but also as an instrument of conditioning that organizes the realm of aesthetic phenomena through its diverse manifestations (see Mukarovsky, 1936, in Lorusso, 2015).

As will be discussed, this "normative" structure, which cuts across the divide between materiality and discourse, serves as a normative aesthetic structure for the interpretation of other related texts: "The law-forming nucleus of culture, which genetically emerges from the primordial mythological core, reconstructs reality as a wholly ordered entity, characterized by a singular narrative and an ultimate meaning. Although one or more texts represent it, these texts are distinguished within the broader cultural system as a normalizing force, existing on a meta-level about all other textual groups within that culture. The texts belonging to this category are intrinsically interconnected, evident in their ability to be succinctly encapsulated into a single statement." (Lotman, 1990, p.162). In essence, sandals might

7 In Lotman's cultural semiotics, self-description refers to the way a culture represents and interprets itself through internal modeling systems which consolidate and transmit foundational values. Unlike external descriptions, which are analytic and comparative, self-description is reflexive, functioning as the culture's internal model about its own identity and structure. It stabilizes meaning within a cultural system by establishing shared codes, symbolic objects, and archetypal metaphors. Applied to the example of Jesus's sandals, self-description operates through the different communities' interpretive lens, where the sandals are not merely practical objects but signs embodying humility or countercultural simplicity. Such objects gain cultural and theological weight by recurring in narratives that reinforce a core metaphorical framework—in this case, humility and divine purpose. Even as new interpretive layers emerge in later contexts, the object remains tethered to its original semantic core through self-descriptive mechanisms. This anchoring allows semiotic agents (abductors) to explore new meanings within constrained interpretive fields, as West (2019, p. 12) suggests, while ensuring continuity through culturally endorsed narratives. Thus, self-description ensures the stability of meaning across time, even as cultural reinterpretation unfolds.

8 i.e. the "aesthetic force" of the sandals.

operate as a trans-cultural discursive isotopy wherein their metaphorical significance remains dynamic rather than static, evolving through repeated cultural iterations that consistently reinforce the shared sense of humility (Greimas and Courtés, 1979: 2011).

3. Humility as a rhetorical motif in Carolingian exegesis

A pertinent text of departure for investigating this phenomenon is located in the late-nineteenth-century reliquary triptych situated within the parish church of Sankt Salvator in Prüm, which enshrines three pieces of intricately adorned medieval leatherwork (Smith, 2016, p. 437-455). The reliquary encompasses a meticulously embroidered sole embellished with golden foliage. Adjacent to this sole are two slippers, also adorned in gold, which exhibit characteristics more aligned with an aristocratic style of footwear rather than modest sandals, and certainly diverge from representations typical of the 1st century. These remnants originate from a pair of shoes likely commissioned for an individual of high social standing, destined for ceremonial purposes rather than quotidian use. An inscription designates them as "parts of the sandals of the Most Holy Savior" (*Particulae Sandaliis SS. Salvatoris*), suggesting that they are merely fragments associated with the Lord's sandals. It appears that the authentic relic resides within these artifacts, in the sense that the original components were integrated into these luxurious "slippers" during the Carolingian era, specifically in the 8th to 9th centuries. The reliquary presents these fragments as "the sandals of Christ", flanked by depictions of Pippin III (*Pippinus rex*) and Pope Zacharias (*Zacharias papa*), rendered in mock-Carolingian enamel and goldwork. The relics were scientifically examined by geneticist Gérard Lucotte, who found traces of minerals like silicate, feldspar, and magnesium, indicative of desert environments; furthermore, traces of titanium were detected—an element relatively uncommon, found in iron-rich terrains known as *Terra Rossa*, predominantly located in the vicinity of Jerusalem. This suggests that the relics may indeed have originated from Jerusalem, even though they were incorporated into a Carolingian-era royal sandal. The relic was presented as a donation in 752 by Pope Zacharias (741-752) to Pepin the Short, likely intended to formalize the accord between the Franks and the Church: Pepin was to be recognized by the Holy See as the legitimate monarch (supplanting the Merovingian lineage) in exchange for his protection against Lombard incursions. In 754, Pepin was anointed and consecrated king by Pope Stephen II, Zacharias's successor. Adhering to this agreement, Pepin triumphed over the Lombards on two separate occasions (754 and 756), expelling them from territories claimed by the Church, which he subsequently gifted (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the sandals of Christ are first recorded in history at Prüm as referenced in a notable diploma issued by Pippin III and his consort, Bertrada, in the year 762, which lists that Prüm had acquired the sandals of Christ by 762 at the latest, but possibly as early as its re-foundation in 752 (Smith, 2016, pp. 438-39). However, despite their prominence in Pippin's diploma, the sandals never became the object of a formal liturgical cult in their own right. Nonetheless, their significance lies in the simultaneous

establishment of a thorough Christianization initiative by the Carolingians, which accompanied their military successes. This belief system utilized theological and liturgical frameworks to offer a hermeneutic that allowed military actions to be interpreted in alignment with Christian principles. And while, descriptions of these sandals vary, with some referring to them as "thonged sandals", while others describe them simply as "calciamenta" (generic footwear) (Smith, 2016, pp. 441-447), they held significant value for Pippin III and were passed through Charlemagne's inner circle to Saint-Riquier, later reaching the Lateran through Louis the Pious. There, they were used in ceremonial rites by Pope Nicholas I and featured in the Exaltation of the Cross celebrations. The Byzantine imperial collection also acquired them later, emphasizing their prominent role in the history of Christ's relics and their connection to pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, facilitating a semblance of relocation for the Holy Land within Western churches. And, most importantly, Carolingian audiences became acquainted with these sandals as they are significantly embedded within a *rhetorical motif* articulated by all four Evangelists, which carried profound theological implications (Cf Mark 1.7; Luke 3.16; John 1.27. See Augustine, 1904:129-130). This motif is exemplified in the words of John the Baptist, who, in contrast to his baptismal practices, declares: "He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear."

Indeed, Carolingian exegetes had access to a diverse collection of patristic commentaries, prominently featuring sermons by Gregory the Great on the Gospels (Smith, 2016); Augustine's insights on baptism (Augustine, 1908, p. 271), and an anonymous eighth-century commentary on Matthew attributed to an Irish scholar (Smith, 2016:447). Augustine elucidated that Matthew's narrative, along with those of the other three Gospels (in which John the Baptist declares his unworthiness to untie Jesus' sandals), conveys a theme of humility; a perspective further amplified by two distinguished Carolingian commentators, Hrabanus Maurus and Paschasius Radbertus (Jong, 1995, pp. 161-76). Hrabanus synthesized his sources in a structured manner: John the Baptist was simply articulating his humility; nonetheless, those inclined towards allegorical interpretation might (as per Gregory the Great) have perceived this statement as indicative of divine incarnation, given that footwear is crafted from deceased animals. Similarly, Paschasius Radbertus presented dual interpretations. The foundational reading acknowledged John's humility and reluctance to equate himself with Jesus; conversely, the advanced interpretation highlighted the profundity encapsulated by this footwear: it represented not only the incarnation of the Word but also encompassed universal sacraments articulated within the gospels—messages which John deemed unworthy to proclaim (Smith, 2016). Therefore, for Frankish scholars grappling with biblical enigmas, Jesus' footwear consistently conveyed figurative and typological meanings.

Esteemed and exotic, this pair of ornate shoes epitomized early medieval gift characteristics: versatility, ambivalence, and connectivity. These attributes significantly elucidate that they were adaptable enough to be re-contextualized as symbolic representations of a novel form of Christological kingship specific

to Carolingian ideals. In this endeavor, they established a durable connection between Pippin, Bertrada, and their lineage with the authority of the Lateran, while simultaneously embodying humility at the core of their familial foundation in Priim. The prestige associated with ownership conferred such status upon them that it incited Rome and Constantinople—the two new Jerusalems—to seek out their own Christ's sandals in emulation of the emergent Carolingians. Given that these sandals were material objects imbued with profound symbolic meaning, they attained authenticity as relics at a pivotal political juncture because they embodied biblical literalism along with papal ceremonial grandeur and elevated rhetoric through which their credibility remained unchallenged. From this vantage point, I believe that the relic of the sandals served as an instrument of normativity, delineating political authority while fostering a form of identificatory determination positively articulated by Carolingian-Christian believers ("We are this"). Through this concretization emerges what Gadamer refers to as the "constitution of horizons," (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 302) in which the theme of humility becomes an essential component in the interpretative process across time (Assmann, 1995, p. 130). Perceptual horizons are always operative; however, horizons of understanding are not necessarily given—they often require intentional effort to be cultivated. In seeking to understand a person or a text, it is imperative to approximate the conceptual horizon within which the subject matter held meaning for the author or speaker. Importantly, this does not imply that we must uncover their intentions, although such knowledge may be beneficial. Instead, these horizons are objective features of the broader conceptual and cultural environment that render meaning intelligible. They are not merely subjective states of mind but are embedded in the historical and linguistic contexts that shape their understanding.

As Gadamer emphasizes, understanding is fundamentally a matter of engaging with these horizons : « Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of 'situation' by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of a situation is the concept of a 'horizon'. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular standpoint». (Gadamer 1989, p. 302)

« When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author's mind, but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views ». (*ibid*, p. 292)

In this context, the sandals under examination performed a dual normative function: they act as both a physical manifestation of the sanctified presence of the deceased body of Jesus and as a concretion of collective religious identity and devotion. In this capacity, they mediated material connections between believers and the divine, forging a tangible link between the sacred and the everyday. It is through established norms that individuals articulate their sense of communal affiliation, enabled by a framework of recollections and derivations, which may progressively become assimilated into the system of regularity over time. In this regard, the embodiment of cultural memory associated with the sandals of

Jesus is evident in two modalities: firstly, in the potential inherent within an archive composed of accumulated texts, images, and norms that create a comprehensive horizon; secondly, in actuality, where each contemporary context interprets this meaning from its distinct perspective, thus bestowing a new significance upon it. The dialectical interplay among these dynamics constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for their transmission within the culturally institutionalized heritage of society, underscoring the importance of sacred relics in stabilizing a cultural habit across various contexts.

As techniques of biblical interpretation changed, so too did their plausibility as relics, and an identification that the Carolingians had accepted came unstuck in late-twelfth-century Rome. At that point, ambivalence became their dominant attribute, and they were taken out of liturgical use. Only pious nineteenth-century antiquarianism at Prüm rescued them from complete oblivion. This cultural renewal produced a large number of historical narratives, capable of articulating the worldviews of the communities in which they were embedded. According to this paradigm, it is only by engaging with these biases and preconceptions that individuals can formulate inferences concerning existing knowledge, thereby facilitating a rediscovery of the text. Utilizing a semiotic category dear to its generative component, it could be asserted that norms maintain continuity depending on enunciative practice (Fontanille, 1998). That is, they relate to that rich and articulated set of "discursive memories," now impersonal enunciations, having entered into common knowledge which rhetorically (through figures of elocutio, argumentative schemes, typical images etc.) might reactivate in every speech acts components, knowledge forms and habits rendered impersonal by the passage of time.

4. Final remarks: a symbol of humility across time

As framed by the previous paragraph, while firmly rooted in established norms and bodies of knowledge, each contemporary situation engages with the sandals as symbols of humility in distinctive ways—whether through appropriation, critique, preservation, or transformation. Throughout this interpretive process, each act of understanding produces further biases (i.e., new interpretative knowledge), which subsequently open up novel pathways for comprehension and generate fresh interpretations—a dynamic that promotes an oscillation between grasping specific segments of each *text* and comprehending its entirety through the metaphor.

A compelling illustration of this phenomenon is evident in early cinematic representations, in which sandals have emerged as a significant emblematic element associated with biblical figures, functioning as a concise representation of piety, humility, and historical veracity. This iconography has been perpetuated in various films, most notably in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), where sandals serve as icons of the ancient world and the revered personalities of the Old Testament. The film's epic scale and lavish set designs helped reify axiological identifications between the sandals and biblical characters, such as Moses and other figures in the *Exodus* narrative. Charlton Heston's portrayal of Judah

in Ben-Hur—a character rooted in Roman Judea—ensures that the sandal, as part of the costume, remains a potent remnant of the ancient world, evoking themes of humility, struggle, and redemption. The sandals worn by the characters are not merely accessories, but elements woven into the fabric of a narrative that aims to connect the viewer to a far, yet spiritually resonant, time.

Furthermore, this process has continued to thrive even in films that move beyond the confines of biblical epics, such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), in which sandals take on a more universal, almost archetypal role. The hobbits—central figures in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth—are almost always depicted wearing simple footwear, underscoring their connection to nature, humility, and the quiet strength that arises from their unexpected heroism. In this context, sandals, while not directly referencing biblical figures, continue to serve as a potent symbol of human endurance and the hero's embodiment of spiritual humility.

The 1960s also evokes a significant transformation that ultimately leads to a *thematic re-categorization* (Greimas, 1994; Bertetti, 2017) of the sandals as a countercultural commodity for the repudiation of Cold War ideologies and prevailing societal norms. Here, the sandals became part of a fashion narrative that served as a crucial vehicle for the spread of countercultural ideals, playing an especially significant role in communicating its values. The phenomenon of habit change within this framework can be analyzed through the concept of iconicity, wherein the alteration of interpretive habits is contingent upon plastic qualities that possess an iconic dynamic. Such signs operate primarily not through any intrinsic or historical linkage to their referents; instead, they bear a resemblance to or imitate the objects they denote, thereby instigating transformations in perception and interpretation. For instance, within the "hippie subculture", sandals—despite lacking a direct correlation to humility—came to embody this value due to their plastic qualities, conjuring notions of simplicity and modesty. This shift led to further biases in the aesthetic-laden norm of humility that had long since become a site of contestation of consumerist aspirations and materialistic pursuits. This process was later ignited by a critical comparison between distinct groups arising from the countercultural upheaval of the late 1960s: for example, hippies versus mainstream culture/ leather sandals versus richly embellished shoes; Hippies vs the "Jesus freaks" (Ellwood, 1973). In this framework, the alteration of habit is intrinsically linked to a challenge against and a creative appropriation of mainstream culture, fostering both utopian and practical evaluations (Floch, 2013). This requires an analysis that extends beyond superficial stylistic elements to reveal more profound significances (Hebdige, 2013; Dudley, 1997). As a result, the sandals—whether in their unmodified or transformed forms—came to demonstrate an isomorphic connection with the core aspects, activities, organizational frameworks, and collective identity of the Hippie counterculture. A notable shift in this context is the emergence of the Jesus Movement (also regarded as "Jesus Freaks"), which exemplified a pivotal change for many former hippies who sought enduring fulfillment beyond what could be obtained from the hippie lifestyle (Ellwood, 1973). As they gravitated towards evangelical

Christianity, their appropriation of sandals—initially associated with the hippie ethos—acquired renewed spiritual significance. The sandals, once representative of humility within hippie culture, acquired a newly defined symbolic status as signs of both simplicity and Christ-like modesty, functioning as a cognitive bridge connecting their previous countercultural values to their emerging Christian identity. In this context, the sandals persisted in embodying the non-materialistic ethos of the Hippie movement, serving as a clear repudiation of consumerist excess, while simultaneously reflecting an adherence to Christian humility.

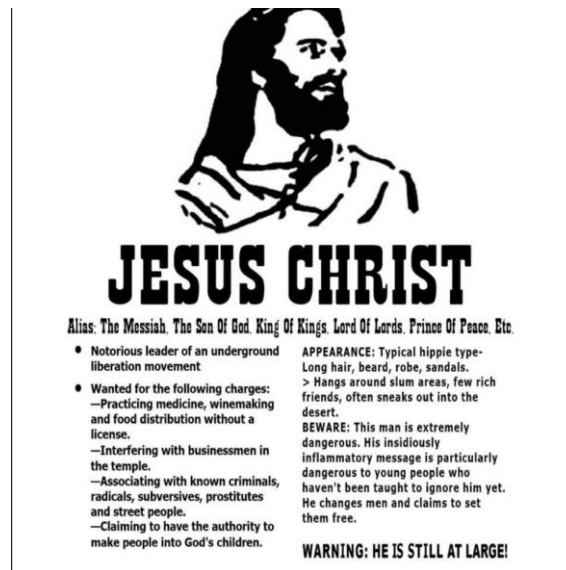


Fig. 1: Jesus' Freaks poster, California, late 1960s.

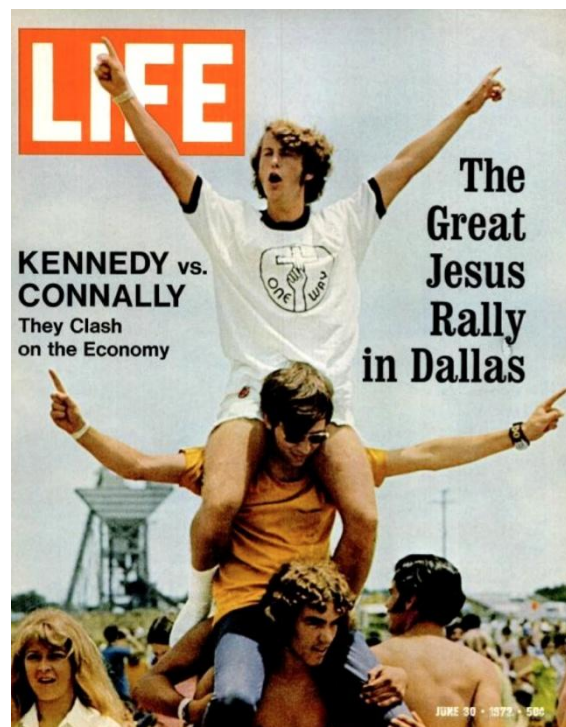


Fig. 2: Life, June 30, 1972

As identity is forged through this iterative process, it assumes both dynamism and situational specificity. This process has the potential to yield moments of heightened understanding and clarity, which Gadamer refers to as a "fusion of horizons". Such a fusion transpires when the interpreter's horizon (i.e., their prior knowledge, also conceptualized in Echiian terms as "encyclopedia") aligns with the horizon, context, or perspective of the text in a specific context (Gadamer, 1989, p. 397; see also Gadamer 2007; Barak, 2020, pp. 1-16). Here, it is not merely the text that undergoes reinterpretation from a novel vantage point; rather, the interpreter's subjectivity is also reassessed through this renewed lens. Consequently, interpretation functions similarly to a substantive dialogue: it transforms both participants—the text and the interpreter—and alters their respective perceptions of themselves and their surrounding world. As noted by Floch (2013), identity can fluctuate based on how signs are manipulated and re-semanticized. In parallel fashion, the sandals materialize as a flexible performative construct, exemplifying how visual identity intricately connects with social performativity, articulating a set of values while engaging with broader social dynamics, while also delineating what is excluded from the interpreter's horizon. This emergent habit—intertwined with social performativity—is inherently adaptable and responsive to shifting social contexts, wherein visual indicators like sandals are perceived, whether via direct historical connections or through their resemblance to established symbols deeply embedded within cultural narratives. Such reliance ensures that habit changes manifest not merely rationally but also resonate profoundly across generations entrenched within collective memory, recognizing these symbolic associations throughout time.

In conclusion, the alteration of habits associated with countercultural movements can be effectively understood through the principle of bricolage, as articulated by Floch (2013), which holds significant relevance in the present case study. For instance, modern consumers who choose to purchase Jesus' sandals at Walmart or the Holy Land Shop engage in the synthesis of cultural symbols derived from their experiential backgrounds to forge a new identity narrative. Through the process of bricolage, these consumers reinterpret existing cultural elements, reorganizing them into a coherent framework that embodies values such as humility and simplicity while attempting to position themselves in contrast to mainstream culture, predominantly secular and linked to a consumerist ethos. In this context, we observe a dichotomy between religion and consumer culture, as well as normal culture versus counterculture, centered around the notion of humility. For instance, on the Holy-Land Website⁹ the sandals are reframed as a countercultural symbol of religious adherence, contraposed to the existing paradigm of consumerist-materialistic culture, while also appearing as a symbol of defiance:

JESUS BIBLICAL SANDALS. Jesus sandals are often called the most comfortable and beautiful footwear in existence. They also carry a strong connection to the Christian faith and the Savior they are named after. It's no wonder many people enjoy wearing them. But have you ever wondered why

⁹ <https://holylandmarket.com/collections/jesus-biblical-sandals>

they're named for the Biblical hero? What's the story behind these iconic sandals? Let's take a look at the history of Jesus sandals and how they've become such a popular choice for footwear today. Religious people of all faiths wear them as a way to practice modesty from the Holy Land to Pali, Hawaii. They also would make a wonderful gift if you are looking for something special for a person of faith. Even those less religious friends would appreciate a gift of a sturdy and well-designed sandal that will last for years!

On the other side, on the Walmart Website¹⁰, we can observe a slightly different commercial outlet, aligning more with a consumerist, traditional approach, including options like black Jesus' sandals crafted from different materials, such as fake leather or plastic. Consequently, by embracing a plastic and visual identity that resonates with ideals related to simplicity and humility—qualities historically associated with figures like Jesus—sandals emerge as powerful symbols that advocate for spirituality over materialism while attempting to resist mainstream consumerist paradigms, sometimes with an ironic twist.

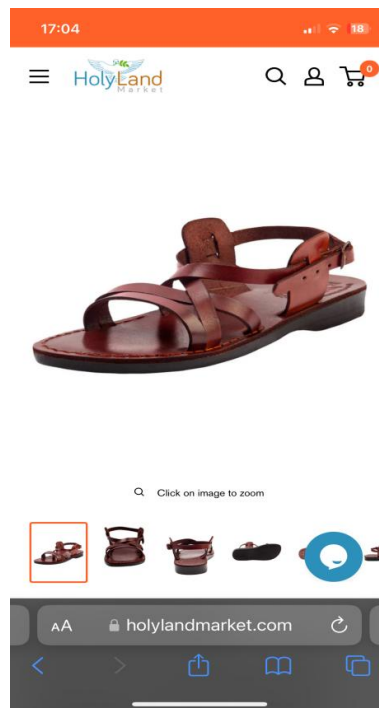


Fig. 3

Source: <https://www.walmart.com/ip/Holy-Land-Market-Men-Women-Biblical-Jesus-Leather-Sandals-Slides-From-Jerusalem-Jesus-Style-I-4-4-5-Big-Kid/496428397?classType=VARIANT>

¹⁰ <https://www.walmart.com/c/kp/jesus-sandals>

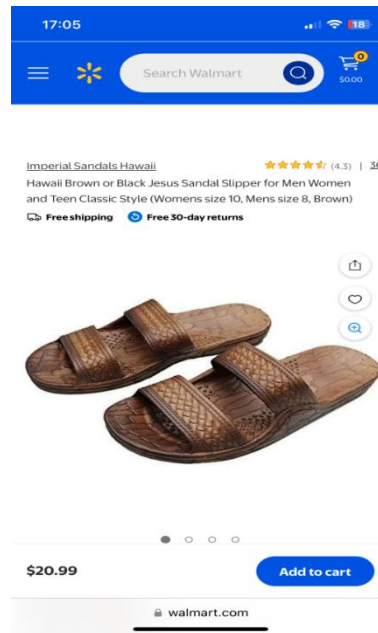


Fig. 4

Source: <https://www.walmart.com/ip/J-Slips-Hawaiian-Jesus-Sandals-Women/613346964>

The transformation of sandals has been significantly accelerated by the culture of social media, which has enabled their evolution from religious and cultural symbols into commodified representations of postmodern emotivism. Traditionally associated with humility and religious significance, Jesus' sandals have indeed experienced a metamorphosis in the postmodern era, mirroring a broader shift toward subjective expression. Within this context, sandals are perceived as symbols that transcend their original religious and cultural significances, embracing the fluidity and individualistic nature of contemporary aesthetic expressions. Emotivism, a philosophical stance positing that moral or aesthetic judgments are expressions of personal feelings or attitudes rather than objective truths, resonates deeply within the modern appropriation of items such as Jesus' sandals (see Macintyre, 1981). In the sense that when individuals don these sandals—whether for religious purposes or merely as a fashion statement—they partake in a form of self-expression that emphasizes an inherently subjective twist, which might reflect a spiritual adherence to humility or an ironic appropriation of it (Bovone, 2017). As such, the act of wearing footwear once imbued with profound religious meanings now elicits a spectrum of emotions, ranging from nostalgia for bygone traditions to sentiments of countercultural defiance or even ironic commentary on the commodification of spirituality. This transformation embodies the overarching postmodern inclination to conflate the sacred with the profane, intertwining the religious with the secular to create hybrid artifacts that reflect an individual's personal feelings and identity rather than adhering to any fixed set of cultural or religious interpretations. Consequently, in the postmodern era, Jesus' sandals transcend mere religious symbolism; they emerge as mutable, subjective signifiers that evoke transient feelings of affiliation with specific aesthetic or cultural moments, derived from depictions associated with figures such as Christ along with other significant archetypes present in spiritual lore,

symbolizing renunciation of materialism coupled with an emphasis on spiritual virtues. In this manner, they encapsulate the fundamental principles of postmodern emotivism, wherein meaning is perpetually evolving and subject to vanishing ethical interpretations. This process shows how cultural *norms* emerge through semiotic practices and vary according to the boundaries defined by the community in question; thus, a singular system can correspond to multiple norms. This process exemplifies that the habit-change is fundamentally rooted in normative frameworks and enunciative practices within particular social contexts or communities.

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