

Reliquaries

I. sweet / Materiality and the Religious Impulse / fall 2008

Byzantine Images Review

Medieval collection and veneration of relics

Icon veneration provides an excellent segue into a discussion of related objects: relics and reliquaries.

relics are one of the most singular and characteristic aspects of western Christianity in the middle ages.

Relics were (in Western Christendom) what icons were in Byzantium.

We read in the essay by Sumption, that one of the earliest recorded instances of relic collection appeared in a description of the 156 A.D. death of St. Polycarp who was burnt at the stake. His disciples wished to carry off his remains:

"we took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place, where the Lord permits us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy, to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom."

Here's the thinking:

holiness envelops the saintly person—the entire soul and body and all that enters into the composition of the human body.

The irony of the position that the saint's body was holy ran was in stark contrast to the general consensus that most bodies (of less athletic Christians) were filthy and weak and corruptible vessels that housed the precious soul.

Still the support for the position that *these* bodies were sacred and good may have derive from the scriptures:

"God created man for incorruption and made him to be an image of His own eternity" (Wisdom 2:23).

"Righteousness is immortal, but injustice causes death" (Wisdom 1:15)

Relic veneration and reliquary Use

St. Jerome made the case that (like icons) the relics themselves were not worshipped, but were an "aid to the veneration of Martyrs." (Sumption)

Relics provided a kind of intercession for the faithful by associating the supplicant with the merits of the martyr.

In week 1, Elizabeth addressed indulgences which often took the form of a written document sold by the church. Pilgrimages to and prayers in the presence of relics often were accompanied by indulgences: a reduction in the time spent in purgatory in return for traveling to a martyr's tomb or relics or intercessory prayers made to the saint of the relic.

Originally relics were laid on the altar during the mass

The Lateran Council of 1215 instructed that relics were not to be exposed except in a reliquary.

Still later, a synod of Bordeaux forbade the removal of relics from their reliquaries (Sumption).

Three possible ways reliquaries are attended to:

- (1) The issue of course when considering reliquaries is that their contents directly affect their use, their production. As we consider these reliquaries today, while beautiful, they have not so much resonance in and of themselves – it is their function or their former function and the mystery around their contents that really grants them status and distinction.
- (2) Another phenomenon is that the medieval person and it is likely even the modern person conflates value of the container with that which is contained. Thus reliquaries are often seen as being one with the relic inside.
- (3) One of the significant possibilities of reliquaries used to house relics may be that this function legitimized the use of three-dimensional forms in the service of devotion. We have addressed in some instances the safety of two-dimensional images and not being as idolatrous or challenging to God as creator as 3-D works. Some scholars, including Freedberg imply that the use of figurative sculptures -- or the *possibility of use* – as reliquaries contributed to the general acceptance of sculpture in the round (Freedberg, 96)

On the art historical assessment of reliquaries

These works were typically overlooked by art historians because they were made of fine metal and precious materials, thus not considered Art or as Belting would say, they are objects from the era “before the era of art.”

The traditional art historian would attempt to discuss the objects themselves in terms of style and technologies apparent in the objects.

We are primarily interested in how these objects functioned and how people responded to them. Additionally, I am drawing on a variety of reliquaries which makes linking styles into a narrative of artistic progression both difficult and inappropriate.

In several cases there is little or no known or documented history accompanying these objects, so it will be most helpful to consider the specific objects collectively as examples of a class of object with a particular function that is still in question.

Box- / Casket-shaped reliquaries

The earliest form reliquaries took was a simple box – often suggesting a sarcophagus.

Reliquary box with Crucifixion and 27 saints, enamel, 9th ce, Constantinople

This reliquary has silver compartments for a piece of the True Cross. Christ in the crucifixion on the cover has his eyes open – this was an early visual practice: Christ was not depicted as dead on the cross, but living. His body seems to hover in front of the cross, but not really hang from the cross. This was not a function of the medium or the facility of the artist, but was the earliest manner of depicting the crucifixion (the cross with the body of Christ).

This image refers to the crucifixion and the resurrection or 'intactness' of Jesus. It refers to the manner of his death while skipping over the corporeal death itself.

Reliquary with Old and New Testament Scenes, silver gilt, 4th ce, Italy

View of reliquary / three angles

Discovered in the 16th ce under the high altar of the church of San Nazaro, Milan Italy with numerous other reliquaries.

Inside it was another round reliquary inscribed with "DEDALIA VIVAS IN CHRISTOS" Dedalia may you live in Christ! This referenced Manlia Dedalia, an aristocratic lady of Milan who likely donated the reliquary to the church.

This smaller reliquary held *brandea* (Sumption discusses these types of relics) small pieces of cloth that had been in contact with the remains of the apostles and martyrs, sent to the church of Milan, according to tradition by Pope Damasus (366-384).

In keeping with the era in which it was made, the images have both a strong link to Roman antecedents (the beardless, Roman tunic-ed Christ) and early Byzantine imperial presentation of the enthroned Virgin and Christ in majesty.

Detail view: lid and front panel

Lid: 5 containers of bread and 6 jugs. Reference is to two of Christ's miracles: the multiplication of loaves and fishes and the changing of water to wine at the wedding of Cana. Both miracles allude to the Eucharist.

Front panel: Virgin's high-backed chair includes a large ceremonial cushion which in the Holy Roman Empire/Byzantium characterized high status and divinity

Detail view: two side panels

panel: Solomon's judgment. Solomon appears both aristocratic and military, looking like a late Roman emperor. This narrative is quite rare among early Christian images, suggesting that it may play a part in a larger overall thematic concept.

panel: scholars are uncertain about this narrative. The **narrative of Joseph recognizing his brothers** is most likely. The imperial composition is apparent here as in the Solomon and Virgin images.

View of reliquary: fourth panel

panel: three Hebrew youths in furnace with angel. the symmetrical, iconic composition is not presented here as overtly as in the other panels, but they are dressed like fourth century imperial courtiers. The youths hold their hands aloft in a kind of Orant gesture of prayer.

The overarching concept is likely an emphasis on the earthly judgment achieved through divine inspiration (Christ on the lid). Only through divine grace bestowed on the emperor was earthly justice made possible.

Reliquary with Christ and apostles, silver, 5th ce, Italy, 5 inches tall

Discovered in a small marble casket below the floor of the Cathedral of Pola, Croatia, 19th ce.

Hexagonal box with lid. Embossed figures of Christ and five apostles on each of the sides. Christ is beardless and holding Gospel book. Peter is on Jesus' left and Paul appears on the pieces as well as 3 other unidentified apostles. Figures are repeated in half-length again on lid.

Gold reliquary box, 6th ce, Constantinople

This small gold box was found inside the silver box and likely held relics.

Reliquary of St. Lawrence and St. Jerome, silver, 15-16th ce, Switzerland

On the left: images linking St. Lawrence's martyrdom to the sacrifice/martyrdom of Jesus.

This image is useful in helping us understand the significance of martyrdom in the early church and the celebration of martyr's relics in the medieval church.

“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (*Matthew 5:11-12*)

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. (*Psalms 116.15*)

The juxtaposition of Christ's death with Lawrence's, clearly links these two deaths.

On the right: image of St. Jerome in his study, presumably translating the Greek bible into the Vulgate, with his mascot and symbol, the lion.

Reliquary casket of Champagnat, 12th ce, bronze gilt enamel, 12 cm. high, France

View of alternate

Saint Martial, first bishop of Limoges, prominently appears to the right of Christ on this gilded enamel reliquary

This house/casket form is of gilt and enamel.

On this side are the Evangelists symbols on the roof and rear panel.

Matthew = winged man

John = eagle

Mark = lion

Luke = ox

St. Peter appears with a large red key on the end. St. Paul is on the other end of the casket.

On the reverse, Christ appears between the Alpha and Omega flanked by the Virgin and St. Martial.

Wearable reliquaries

Our next three examples fall into the category of those reliquaries that could be worn – as amulets or talismans.

Reliquary pendant with St. George and St. Demetrios, gold and enamel, 13th ce, Thessaloniki

Shows St. George on its front, with a prayer in Greek: “[the wearer] prays that you will be his fiery defender in battles.”

This pendant has been altered from its original state. When it was first made it must have shown an image of St Demetrios because the inscription around the edge reads, “anointed with your blood and myrrh.” St. Demetrios' relics reputedly emit the scent of myrrh.

The object originally must have been a reliquary of St. Demetrios, famous for the production of myrrh at his shrine. The pendant has a space inside, when opened, for myrrh and relics.

The verso has an embossed supine figure representing the body of Demetrios lying in his tomb in the church.

This piece then offered both a symbolic image of the saint and their actual bodily remains.

“Charlemagne’s Amulet’, gold and gems, 8th ce, Constantinople

This originally was housed in Charlemagne’s Palatine treasury in Aachen Germany. In 1804, it was given to Empress Josephine (wife of Napoleon)

It was made in the shape of a small ampula, a popular form from the early Christian era – especially among pilgrims.

Originally made to hold a lock of the Virgin’s hair, now it contains fragments of the True Cross.

The border is suggestive of the kinds of decoration that were drawn from fine metals objects by illuminators or manuscripts.

Beresford Hope Cross, Virgin and saints, enamel, 9th ce, Turkey

This was likely a pectoral cross, strung on a chain, and worn in the center of the chest below the heart (as opposed to just below the collarbones). Pectoral crosses, or pectorale, are distinguished by their size (up to six inches across)

The front: A depiction of the crucifixion flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the disciple. Below is the gesture of a praying orant. It likely held a fragment of the True Cross.

The back: The Virgin surrounded by Christ (top), St. Andrew (right), St. Peter (bottom) St. Paul (left)

Enger reliquary cross, 11th ce, gold gems, pearls, Germany

Enger refers to the collection in which this cross was included.

This cross would likely have been placed on the altar of a church or chapel.

On the front is a crystal with an engraved image of an angel, covering a small relic of the True Cross on a gold background inscribed in niello “+ DE LIGNO DNI”.

On the reverse the *Agnus Dei* occupies the center, surrounded at each extremity with the symbols of the evangelists.

The *Agnus Dei* is the image of the slain or sacrificial lamb representing Christ. Most commonly the lamb is pierced as was Christ and his blood pours into a chalice referencing the Eucharistic wine. He frequently carries a cross or banner with a cross.

While the Quinisext Council of 692 declared that Christ would be depicted as a man not a lamb, but clearly the lamb imagery continues to be used.

Matthew the winged man / Mark the lion / Luke the ox / John the eagle

Reliquary of Henry II, bronze, enamel, 12th ce, Bavaria (owned by Duke Henry the Lion contained relics of St. Henry II the Holy Roman Emperor, the Lion's namesake)

A quatrefoil shape = refers to the Evangelists

On the base are warrior saints Gereon, Mauritius, Eustace and Sebastian.

On this side we see St. Henry II (last Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire) pictures in a pose very similar to Christ in majesty.

On his left is Empress Kunigunde

On his right the Emperor referred to as Welandus monachus offering this very reliquary to Henry

There is no record of the relic this might have held, though it is likely given Henry the Lion's devotion to St. Henry that it contained something of St. Henry.

Reliquary plaque, silver, 12th century, Constantinople

This plaque records the words of the Gospels and the image depicts the moment Jesus' resurrection was discovered by Jesus' female disciples.

It originally held a piece of the sepulcher in which Jesus was buried.

Speaking or Shaped Reliquaries

Reliquary of the Holy Nail, gold and precious stones, 10th ce, Germany

And detail

This type of reliquary is known as a speaking or shaped reliquary

The iron spike, said to be one of the three with which Christ was nailed to the cross,

was carried in processions, used for swearing oaths, and

is reported to have healed several blind people during one of its exhibitions.

While it is evident that this reliquary was made to hold this particular nail (assumed to be a nail of the Crucifixion), the nail itself is about 20 mm shorter than its reliquary. In keeping about what we've learned about the relic trade, the Trier church records, it is recorded that a sale of part of the nail was arranged by the Canon Benna in 975.

Potential issues with speaking or shaped reliquaries

Thus the 1:1 relationship of a foot reliquary to hold a foot bone would be the logical reading of a shaped reliquary.

However, while seeming logical, the 1:1 relationship appears to have been rarely adhered to in the middle ages.

(1) Hahn points out that this 1:1 relationship rarely existed if it was ever intended to begin with.

Numerous church treasuries indicate that reliquaries of one shape might hold numerous and widely varying relics, none necessarily corresponding to the shape of the reliquary.

(2) Bynum suggests that *if* this relationship existed it was not quite a 1:1 relationship, but might rather be a fragment of skull bone or a lock of hair held within a head-shaped reliquary. In Bynum's view then, the reliquary reconstitutes the fleshly form suggested by the fragmented relic within. It may be a kind of resurrection image.

Portable altar and reliquary of St. Andrew's sandal, 977, gold gems pearls glass and enamel, length 45 cm.
enshrines a sole of St. Andrew the Apostle's sandal

This relic is one of those said to have been brought from the Holy Land to Trier by Saint and Empress Helena (Constantine's mother) in the 4th century. Helena was credited with finding the True Cross.

The portable altar consists of an oak box covered in gold and ivory and topped with a gilded model of the saint's foot, complete with bejeweled sandal strap. It has a sliding lid so that the relics inside could be shown and touched.

The long sides of the box have ivory plates on which are enameled images – the evangelists symbols.

The X-shape in pearls on the short sides may be an allusion to the X-shaped cross on which Andrew was crucified.

San Vitale mosaic of Justinian I

the opposite end has a gold coin with the portrait of Emperor Justinian I surrounded by pearls and red garnet.

Portable altar and reliquary of St. Andrew's sandal

The crouching lions that make up the feet are adapted from door knockers, but were used to hang or carried in processions.

The reliquary was made to be portable, so that it could be carried by kings and bishops when they traveled and used for Mass when they were at home.

Foot Reliquary, gilded silver and copper, all on a wood core, crystal, glass, and pearls, a garnet, and a mother-of-pearl relief, 1450, Basel

This unusual reliquary bears an inscription on the sole of the foot/reliquary stating that the vessel originally contained a foot of one of the innocents massacred at the order of Herod

and that the relic was given to the Basel cathedral by Saint Columban (this may be a way of documenting the legitimacy of the relic)

while the reliquary itself was the gift in 1450 of a certain Oswald. (Metropolitan Museum)

There is a crystal in the top of the foot that would allow the relic to be viewed.

Also the crown may refer to the crown of martyrdom as the innocents killed were considered the first martyrs – dying for Christ.

Arm reliquaries

Clockwise from upper left:

St. Nicholas, 13th century (holds a finger)

Arm reliquary, 1230, Metropolitan Museum, Cloisters

St. Patrick arm reliquary

Arm reliquary of apostle, 12th Germany

St. George arm reliquary, Conques, France

arm reliquary, 1300

Arm reliquaries were the most popular and the best surviving examples of “speaking” reliquaries or shaped reliquaries.

In the middle ages, the arm was viewed as the central part of the body dedicated to work and action. (Hahn)

In the case of at least one arm reliquary, there is written documentation suggesting that (1) the ‘arm’ never contained an arm, but instead a piece of Christ’s burial shroud and (2) the arm form was used in public processions and benedictions as a kind of stage prop for the bishop. (Hahn)

Other contemporary sources indicate that arm reliquaries were used for healing the sick. In one instance being laid on the man’s body it “chased” the ailment to another part of the body and finally, when “pressed hard on the man’s body” did the ailment subside entirely. (Hahn)

Hahn suggests that in fact the arm shape was desirable and functional in its own right aside from possibly suggesting that an arm relic was contained within. The addition of a bit of relic – arm, hand or other – may have added general blessing to the form, but the form held a gesture that was useful and symbolic in its own right.

This might be an example related to Freedberg (and Gadamer’s) distinction between the power of images and the power they have after consecration; in this case the insertion of relics may consecrate this image beyond its imagery. But it is also likely that the imagery of the arm in itself was also functional.

Arm Reliquary, 1300-1325, Gilded silver, gems, glass, Prague

A package presumably holding a venerated section of humerus bone from Saint George's right arm is visible through the simulated lacing of the reliquary's gilded armor for the forearm.

The four-sided miniature building on which the limb rests features images of Saint George, Jesus Christ, the Virgin and Child and Saint Ludmila.

Arm reliquary of St. Lawrence, 1170, gold silver gilt and niello

The crystal in the St. Lawrence reliquary – which provides a view of the ‘bone of St. Lawrence’ – was added in the 14th ce.

Several scholars suggest this reliquary was originally made to hold the bone of St. Bartholomew for whom a new reliquary was made in the 14th century and that the relic of St. Lawrence necessitated the labeling with his name and crystal as a result.

Head Reliquaries

The head was considered the locus of the intellect and the soul – thus imagery of the head was particularly powerful.

Head Reliquary of St. Alexander, 1145, silver gilt bronze gilt gems, pearls enamel, height 45 cm.

This nearly life-sized head is mounted on a box carried by dragons.

Alexander is portrayed in enamel on the side of the box, flanked by St. Theodolus and St. Eventius, the other martyrs with whom he died in the 2nd ce. In Rome.

Bust of St. Ludmila, gilded copper, 14th ce, Prague

Her hagiography states that Ludmila was married to the first Christian Duke of Bohemia. The couple was converted to Christianity around 871.

Their efforts to convert Bohemia to Christianity were initially not well received, and they were driven from their country for a time by the pagans. Eventually the couple returned, and ruled for several years.

The couple was succeeded by their two sons and later by their grandson King (as in “Good King”) Wenceslas. Ludmila was the primary caretaker of Wenceslas as a child.

Wenceslas' mother became jealous of Ludmila's influence over Wenceslaus. She had two noblemen murder Ludmila by strangling her with her veil.

A monochrome piece, the eyes are startling in this object and may have some relationship to the significance of eyes in icons.

Reliquary bust of St. Yrieix, 13th ce, Gilded silver, rock crystal, gems and glass, France ***View of walnut wood core and frontal view of reliquary***

the sixth-century founder of a monastery south of Limoges that still bears his name.

The reliquary presumably held a fragment of the saint's skull

Access through a lid on the top of the reliquary.

Charles the Bold reliquary, 15th ce, gold enamel,

Charles the Bold was unusually fond of images of himself in precious metals.

Feeling bad about the abuses he inflicted on the cathedral of St. Lambert in Liege, 1468, he had this piece made his goldsmith depicting him kneeling, sponsored by St. George, patron saint of soldiers and knights.

The piece is recorded in the church treasury, though not described as a reliquary until 1616 when a relic of St. Lambert was placed in the crystal held by Charles it recorded. Thus the piece may not have been made with the intention of functioning as a reliquary.

Some scholars suggest that this reliquary of unusual composition, may have been modeled on a pictorial prototype – that of Jan van Eyck’s painting *Virgin with Canon van der Paele*.

What is remarkable about an image like this is Charles’ positioning himself in the company of a saint and documenting this intention in precious metal sculpture.

One might view this either as an (1) act of hubris or an (2) earnest desire to be in contact with the sacred.

Reliquary of St. Foy (Faith), mid 10th century, gold, jewels, France

The monks of Conques acquired (stole) the relics of St. Faith in the 9th century and had this piece made to enshrine them by the 10th ce.

“The monastery of Conques was dedicated in honor of the Holy Savior. Long ago the holy martyr’s [St. Foy] body was secretly carried away from the city of Agen and brought to Conques by two monks. After that, St. Foy’s name prevailed there [the church became known as her church rather than a church dedicated to the Savior]. ...the renown of the great miracles flew across the whole of Europe, many of the faithful made over their own manors and many other pious gifts to St. Foy by the authority of their wills. And though the abbey had long ago been poor, by these donations it began to grow rich and to be raised up in esteem. The most outstanding of the ornaments then was the splendid image [of St. Foy] which was made long ago. Today it would be considered one of the poorer ornaments if it had not been reshaped anew and renovated into a better figure.” (11th ce Bernard of Angers)

The head is a re-used Roman gold parade helmet into which enameled eyes were set.

The gems were added by accretion as pilgrims brought them to the shrine over the centuries.

The arms and hands reveal signs of a rather disjunctive restoration.

St. Foy was known to harangue pilgrims who offered too small a donation to the church.

Bernard described St. Foy’s miracles as "tricks" or "jokes." One such joke was the following story: a local man holds onto a ring that his dying wife had promised to the saint. The man, whose name is Austrin, uses the ring, however, to wed his second wife. Saint Faith causes the finger of the second wife to swell up in unbearable pain. Austrin and his new wife visit the saint’s shrine, and on the third night, “when the sorrowful woman happened to blow her nose, the ring flew off without hurting her fingers, just as if it had been hurled from the strongest siege engine, and gave a sharp crack on the pavement at a great distance.”

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