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The Crown of His Kingdom: Imperial Ideology, Palace Ritual, and the Relics of Christ's Passion*

In his well-known eyewitness account of the palace revolt of John “the Fat” Komnenos, likely written shortly after the events in the summer of 1201, Nikolaos Mesarites, then *skevo-phylax* of the churches inside the imperial palace, vividly described the sacred contents of the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos, a small but precious building located, as Patriarch Photios records, “in the very midst of the palace” (ἐν μέσοις αὐτοῖς ἀνακτόροις) and in close proximity to both the imperial apartments and the throne room, the *Chrysotriklinos*.¹ Like the *Chrysotriklinos*, the church of the Virgin had been rebuilt and lavishly refurbished under emperor Michael III (842–867) after the end of Iconoclasm, and it gradually assumed the role of the empire’s most important repository of sacred relics, a *locus sanctus* at the very epicenter of imperial power and a new Jerusalem at the heart of the Byzantine Empire.²

Unlike earlier authors, who described the imperial relic collection, Mesarites framed his account in a rather unusual way, comparing the palace church metaphorically to the Garden of Eden and the Ark of the Covenant, and its sacred contents to the Ten Commandments:

Hear from my lips the divine account, and learn how these ten treasures are called. [...] First, there is the Crown of Thorns displayed for veneration, still fresh and green and unwithered, since it had a share in immortality through its contact with the head of Christ the Lord, refuting the still-unbelieving Jews, who do not bow down to worship the cross of Christ. In appearance, it is neither rough nor stingy or harmful in any way, but instead looks like it was made from beautiful flowers. If one were allowed to touch it, it would feel smooth and lovely. The branches from which it was wrought are unlike those that grow in the hedges of the vineyards, which catch the dips and hems of garments like street robbers catch their pray, or which sometimes scratch a foot with their thorny tips and draw blood when one passes by, no, nothing like this at all. Rather, they resemble the blossoms of the Frankincense tree, which grow as tiny shoots on the knots of their branches much like small leaves.³

Mesarites continues his Decalogue with a description of one of the nails of Christ’s Crucifixion that remained free of rust on account of the purity of the Lord’s flesh and blood, his iron collar, or neck-cuff, the linen shrouds in which his body was wrapped, the cloth he used to wash his disciples’ feet, the lance that opened his side during the crucifixion, the purple cloak the soldiers draped around him in mockery, the reed that served as his scepter, his leather sandals, and, finally, a fragment of his tombstone that is likened to the stone on which Jacob rested his head (Genesis 28,18) and the corner stone that the builders rejected and that was compared to Christ himself in the letters of St. Paul (Ephesians 2, 20). “Now, people,” thus concludes Mesarites his account, “you have these Ten Commandments, but I will also show you the lawgiver himself, faithfully copied on a towel and engraved on fragile clay with such art that one sees it is not done

* I would like to express my gratitude to Albrecht Berger who kindly read a draft of this essay and provided much appreciated comments and corrections.

1 For Mesarites’s account, see the edition by Heisenberg 1907. For a German translation, see Grabler 1958. For a description of the splendors of the church of the Virgin of the Pharos, see the famous tenth homily of Patriarch Photios, likely delivered on the occasion of the church’s rededication in 864: Mango 1958, 177–190. See also Jenkins/Mango 1955–56, esp. 130 with note 38. For the specific passage cited here, see Mango 1958, 185.

2 On the rebuilding of the *Chrysotriklinos* and the church of the Virgin of the Pharos under Michael III, see Jenkins/Mango 1955–56, 139–140. On the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos and its function as a hoard of the empire’s relics, see Klein 2006; Magdalino 2004. See also Bacci 2003.

3 Heisenberg 1907, 29–30. Grabler 1958, here 287. Belting 1993, 526–527.

by human hand.”⁴ Here, Mesarites refers, of course, to the *Mandylicon* of Edessa and the miraculous imprint it had left on a clay tile, the *Keramion* (or *Keramidion*), when it was hidden or walled up for safekeeping, depending on which version of the legend one reads.⁵ These two image-relics had been brought to Constantinople and deposited in the imperial palace under Emperor Romanos Lekapenos in 944 and Nikephoros Phokas in 968 respectively, and were celebrated in an annual feast on August 16.⁶

Following the recitation of the Decalogue, the *Mandylicon* and *Keramion* serve Mesarites to introduce the lawgiver (νομοδότης) himself and to present the God of the Old and New Testament in the anthropomorphic, or, to use the Byzantine characterization, *theandric* likeness of his son. The recited Decalogue thus becomes a touchstone of the Passion of Christ and a tablet on which the incarnate Logos is spelled out in the material things that came into contact with his life-giving body. What is interesting about Mesarites’s list is that his Decalogue omits perhaps the most well-known of all relics of Christ’s Passion housed at the Pharos Church, namely the True Cross, in favor of a catalogue of objects that quite literally trace the body of Christ from head to toe, beginning with the Crown of Thorns rather than the True Cross, and ending with his sandals before a last, rather unusual object, namely a stone cut from Christ’s tomb which is said to stand as a memento for the God-Man (Θεάνθρωπος) Jesus and a powerful weapon that can crush a mental Goliath and kill death.

It is neither my intention here to provide a detailed analysis of Mesarites’s account nor an exhaustive explanation for the choices he made in listing the various relics as part of his Decalogue—although such an analysis is well overdue and would be a worthwhile exercise. What I would like to do instead is to take a closer look at the Crown of Thorns, the “First Commandment” as it were, and trace its history as both a relic of Christ and an object often associated with the idea of divine kingship in Byzantium and beyond.⁷ While it may be seen as a mere coincidence, there is, in fact, a close connection between those *theandric* images cited by Mesarites—precious embodiments of the lawgiver himself—and the Crown of Thorns that was pressed onto the head of Christ in mockery. If we believe the account of Robert of Clari, the knight from Picardy, who described the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos in his account of the Conquest of Constantinople in 1204, the *Mandylicon* and *Keramion* were displayed in “two rich golden vessels that hung by two great silver chains in the middle of the [Pharos] Church.”⁸ This presentation of the two image-relics, suspended from silver chains in the midst of the chapel is a feature reminiscent of practices recorded for Jerusalem from at least the seventh century onward. An Armenian Guide to the holy places thus cites that “the holy Church of Sion [...] is a hundred ells in length and seventy in breadth, and has eighty columns joined by arches. It has no upper room, but a wooden screen, and on the screen hangs the Crown of Thorns, which they placed on the head of the Life-giver.”⁹ While other Holy Land pilgrims before and after the Persian and Arab conquests of Jerusalem are less specific and merely cite the presence of the Crown of Thorns in the basilica of Holy Sion, Bernard the Monk still confirms a similar set-up around 870, when he reports that “on Mount Sion, [there is a church] called St. Simeon’s, where the Lord washed the feet of his disciples, and where the Lord’s crown of

⁴ Heisenberg 1907, 31; Grabler 1958, 289; Belting 1993, 529.

⁵ On the history of the *Mandylicon*, see Wolf/Dufour Bozzo/Calderoni Masetti 2004; Cameron 1984; Runciman 1931. For different textual versions of the legend, see Dobschütz 1899; for the Syriac tradition, see also Drijvers 1998.

⁶ For the translation of the *Mandylicon* in 944, see the account in *Ioannis Scylitzæ Synopsis historiarum*, ed. H. Thurn (Berlin–New York, 1973), 231.66–23.272. For an English translation, see Wortley 2010, 259. For the *translatio* of the *Keramion* to Constantinople in 968 see *Leonis Diaconi Caloensis Historiae*, ed. C. B. Hase, CSHB (1828), 71. For an English translation of the latter, see Talbot/Sullivan 2005, 121–122.

⁷ On the Crown of Thorns, see most recently Hahn 2015. See also the foundational studies by Gosselin 1828; Mély 1904; Mély 1927. Mercuri 2004.

⁸ Robert of Clari, *La Conquête de Constantinople*, ed. Lauer (1924), 69–70. English translation. McNeal 1936, 104.

⁹ Emin 1860.

thorns hangs.”¹⁰ While the practice of suspending relics in the midst of churches is further attested for the *Templum Domini* in Jerusalem in the twelfth century, where “a skillfully worked vessel of golden brightness,” possibly containing the blood of Christ or holy manna, was recorded by Albert of Aachen as hanging down from the dome, the source cannot be used to substantiate a more widespread earlier practice.¹¹

But let us go back to the Church of Holy Sion and the objects shown to pilgrims inside it. Jerome, writing in 404 about the visit of the blessed Paula, does not know about the crown and merely records that “she was shown the pillar of the church which supports the colonnade and is stained with the Lord’s blood. He is said to have been tied to it when he was scourged.”¹² But a few years later, Paulinus of Nola is the first to attest the crown’s presence in Jerusalem in his letter to Macarius, where he cites “the manger of his birth, the river of his baptism, the garden of his betrayal, the palace of his condemnation, the column of his scourging, the thorns of his crowning, the wood of his crucifixion, the stone of his burial, [and] the places of his resurrection and ascension” as key witnesses of God’s presence on earth and Christ salvific deed.¹³ Around the same time, the *Breviarium* mentions it alongside the column of Christ’s flagellation and the stone with which Stephen was martyred, “in the center of the basilica [on Mount Sion].”¹⁴ By the second half of the sixth century, when the pilgrim from Piacenza visited Jerusalem, further objects were presented inside it:

“[Then] we went to the basilica of Holy Sion,” he reports, “which contains many remarkable things, including the corner stone which the Bible tells us was ‘rejected by the builders.’ [...] In this church is the column at which the Lord was scourged [...]. On this column is the horn from which kings were anointed (including David), and the church also contains the crown of thorns with which they crowned the Lord, and the lance with which they struck him in the side. There are also many of the stones with which they stoned Stephen [...]”¹⁵

It is worth noting that most of the objects encountered by the Piacenza pilgrim in the basilica on Mount Sion are objects later housed in the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos in Constantinople, including the column of Christ’s flagellation, the Crown of Thorns, and the Holy Lance.¹⁶ A fourth object, namely the corner stone that had been rejected by the builders, is directly alluded to by

¹⁰ *Bernardi Itinerarium factum in loca sancta*, PL 121, 569–574. Bernard the Monk, ed. T. Tobler and A. Molinier, *Itinera Hierosolymitana*, 309. Translation after Wilkinson 2002, 266.

¹¹ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, ed. P. Meyer, RHC Occ. 4 (Paris, 1879), 265–713, here 480D–E: “In media siquidem testudine eiusdem templi moderni [...] catenam infixam esse asseuerant, in qua uas aurei fulgoris et operis, ponderis uero circiter ducentarum marcarum, pendere semper solet. Quod urnam auream alii affirmant, alii sanguinem Domini, alii manna in eo absconditum, et sich diuersa opinione in uarias sententias eriguntur.” For an English translation, see Edgington 2007, 435.

¹² Jerome, *Epistulae*, ed. I. Hilberg, CSEL 55, 2nd ed. (Vienna, 1996), Ep. 108.9, 315.4–10. Translation after Wilkinson 2002, 84.

¹³ Paulinus of Nola, *Epistulae*, ed. W. von Hartel, CSEL 29 (Vienna, 1894), Letter 49, 402. 24–27. Translation after Walsh 1966–67, 2:273.

¹⁴ *Breviarium de Hierosolyma*, ed. R. Weber, CCL 175 (Turnhout, 1965), 105–112, here 111.96–98/99: “in media basilica est corona de spinis, quam accepit Dominus/Et est ibi in media basilica corona spinea unde coronatus fuit Dominus apud Iudeos.” Translation after Wilkinson 2002, 93.

¹⁵ *Antonini Placentini Itinerarium*, ed. P. Geyer, CCL 175 (Turnhout, 1965), 127–174, here 140/165.22: “Deinde uenimus in basilica sancta Sion, ubi sunt multa mirabilia, inter quibus quod legitur de lapide angulare, qui reprobatus est ab aedificantibus. [...] In ipsa ecclesia est columna, ubi flagellatus est Dominus [...]. In ipsa columna est illud cornu, de quo reges unguebantur et Dauid. Ibi est in ipsa ecclesia et corona de spinis, qua coronatus est Dominus, et lancea, de qua in latere percussus est Dominus. Ibi sunt et lapides multae, cum quibus lapidatus est Stephanus.” / “Deinde uenimus in basilica santa Syon, ubi sunt mirabilia multa. Inter quibus, quod legitur de lapide angulare, qui reprobatus est ab aedificantibus. [...] In ipsa ecclesia est colomna, ubi Dominus flagellatus est [...]. In ipsa columna est et cornu illud, de quo reges unguebantur. Vnde et Dauid unctus est in regno, et ibi est et corona de spinis, de qua Dominus fuit coronatus. Ibi et lancea, de qua in latere percussus. Ibi et lapides multi, cum quibus fuit lapidatus Stephanus.” Translation after Wilkinson 2002, 140.

¹⁶ Compare the description of Robert of Clari 1924, 69–70.

Mesarites in association with the tenth and final object of his Decalogue. And the horn from which Samuel anointed king David, while not in the Pharos, became the proud possession of an equally important church nearby, namely the *Nea Ekklesia*, built by Emperor Basil I between 876 and 880.¹⁷

Exactly when and how these objects arrived in the imperial capital cannot always be determined with certainty, but the Persian invasion of much of Syria and Palestine in 614 and the Arab conquest of Jerusalem in 637/38 resulted in a number of important relic translations already during the reign of Herakleios (610–641).¹⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, a notice in the *Chronicon Paschale* seems to suggest that the relic of the Holy Lance arrived in Constantinople during the fall of 629, more precisely on October 28 of that year, preceded by the return of the relics of the True Cross and Sponge.¹⁹ There is no mention, however, of a relic of the Crown of Thorns in the context of Herakleios's recovery of these important relics of Christ's Passion following the peace agreements with the Persians in 628 and 629. Nor, for that matter, do later Middle Byzantine sources record the translation or presence of this relic in Constantinople. It is, most notably, absent from the list of relics cited by Constantine VII in his famous harangue delivered to his armies in 958, possibly on the eve of the Byzantine victory over Saif ad-Dawla at Raban, which enumerates the most sacred relics of the Passion of Christ in imperial possession, namely "the precious wooden fragments [of the True Cross] and the undefiled lance, the precious titulus, the wonder-working reed, the life-giving blood which flowed from his precious rib, the most sacred tunic, the holy swaddling clothes, the God-bearing winding sheet, and the other relics of his undefiled Passion."²⁰

Unless we assume that the Crown of Thorns hides in the undefined category mentioned at the end, it seems that the first reference to the Crown of Thorns as part of the relic collection of the Pharos Church at Constantinople is found not in Byzantine but in Western sources such as the anonymous pilgrim's account in the manuscript known as *Tarragonensis 55*, written probably in the last quarter of the eleventh century, or the famous *Letter of Alexis Comnenus to Count Robert of Flanders*, allegedly written in 1090 or 1091, or the *Anonymus Mercati*, a twelfth century Latin translation of a Byzantine guide-book to the sanctuaries and relics of Constantinople.²¹ All three list the Crown of Thorns alongside other prominent relics of Christ's Passion in the Pharos Church of the imperial palace, albeit in different order. A fourth Latin source, namely a late eleventh century text known as the *Descriptio qualiter Karolus Magnus clavum et coronam Domini a Constantinopoli Aquis Grani detulerit*, later reworked in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, led Fernand de Mély to assume that the Crown of Thorns must have been in Constantinople by the last quarter of the eleventh century.²² However, the date of 1063 he provided for the relic's presumed *translatio* to Constantinople – and which still seems accepted by some scholars – does not hold.²³ Despite the silence of both Constantine VII in his harangue and John Tzimiskes in his letter to the Armenian king Ashot III, there is evidence that the relic, or at least a portion thereof, had already been in Constantinople by 985.²⁴ Interestingly, the evidence pointing to this fact is not preserved in any literary

¹⁷ On the *Nea Ekklesia* and its relics, see Janin 1969, 361–364; Magdalino 1987.

¹⁸ See Klein 2004, 41–43.

¹⁹ See Klein 2001. See also Klein 2004, 34–36.

²⁰ McGreer 2003, 133.

²¹ On the so-called *Tarragonensis 55*, a twelfth century manuscript preserved in the Biblioteca Pública of Tarragona, see Ciggaar 1995. For the famous letter, allegedly written by Emperor Alexis I. Komnenos to Count Robert of Flanders, see *Epistula Alexii I. Komneni ad Robertum comitem Flandrum*, see *Epistulae et chartae ad historiam primi belli sacri spectantes quae supersunt aevo aequales ac genuinae. Die Kreuzzugsbriefe aus den Jahren 1088–1100*, ed. H. Hagenmeyer (Innsbruck, 1901), 129–138. See also Joranson 1949/50; Schreiner 1998; Gastgeber 1998. For the *Anonymus Mercati*, see Ciggaar 1976.

²² See Mély 1904, 165–440, here especially 172, 180, and 183. For the *Descriptio qualiter*, see Latowsky 2013. For the *Grandes Chronique* tradition more generally, see Hedeman 1991.

²³ See Bacci 2003, 239. Closer on the mark are Hahn 2015, 198–199, and Guerry 2012, 22, who argue for a late tenth or early eleventh century arrival.

²⁴ For the letter of John Tzimiskes to King Ashot, see Adontz 1965.



Fig. 1 Limburg
Staurotheke, open.

or historical account noting the recovery or triumphal return of a lost relic from the East, but in a rather short and humble inscription on a much less humble object, namely the imperial reliquary *staurotheke* now in Limburg an der Lahn (Fig. 1).²⁵ Among the secondary relics grouped around the

²⁵ On the Limburg Staurotheke, see Klein 2009; Pentcheva 2007; Klein 2004, 105–112; Ševčenko 1994; Rauch 1955; Aus'm Weerth 1866, 6–8.



Fig. 2 Limburg Staurotheke (detail), Relic Compartment for the Crown of Thorns.

central relic of the True Cross, one is listed on its hinged door simply as “the Crown of Thorns of the humanity-loving Christ our Lord,” (Fig. 2) thus attesting to the presence of that relic not only in Constantinople, but under the immediate control of the imperial household. The lengthy dedicatory inscription on the exterior frame of the staurotheke, executed in dodekasyllabic verses, leaves no doubt that the reliquary was made between 963, when Emperor Nikephoros Phokas bestowed the title of Proedros on Basil Lekapenos, the reliquary’s patron, and 985, when Basil lost imperial favor and was exiled to the shores of the Bosphorus.²⁶

The date for the likely “arrival” of the Crown of Thorns in the Byzantine capital must be set between 958, the date of Constantine VII’s harangue, and 985, the final year in which Basil could have possibly been in a position to commission the staurotheke, finds further confirmation in yet another Western source, namely Aimon of Fleury’s *Historia Francorum*, which, shortly before the end of the first millennium, claims that the crown was preserved in Constantinople.²⁷ It does not, however, explain the relative silence of contemporary sources, which otherwise take great pride in reporting the recovery and translation of relics of Christ from Edessa, Gabbala, Jerusalem, or elsewhere during this time. We can hardly assume that the Crown of Thorns, with all its obvious connotations of divine kingship, would have been deemed too unimportant or controversial a relic to warrant an official record of its capture and triumphal advent in the city. The Limburg Staurotheke itself seems to emphasize this connection as the inscription on the reverse of the reliquary cross explicitly refers to the “crowned” emperors responsible for the decoration of the fragments of the True Cross (Fig. 3):

God stretched his hands on the Wood, / Gushing forth through it the forces of life. The Emperors Constantine and Romanos / Adorned it with radiant stones and pearls, / Thus making the same full of wonder. / Christ once smashed with it Hades’ Gates / Leading the dead from death to life. / Now the crowned ones who adorned it / Crush with it the barbarians’ pride.

Whether this inscription, which was likely executed years if not decades before its precious container, provided an inspiration for the inclusion of the relic of the Crown of Thorns among the secondary relics of Christ’s Passion, the Theotokos, and John the Baptist, is difficult to assess, but it is likewise difficult to imagine how those who read or heard the verses on relic and reliquary recited, could not compare the imperial στεφνηφόροι mentioned on the reverse of precious relic with the

²⁶ For a discussion of the inscription and date, see Rhoby 2010, 163–169.

²⁷ Aimon de Fleury, *Historia Francorum*, PL 139, 627–798, here 660D.

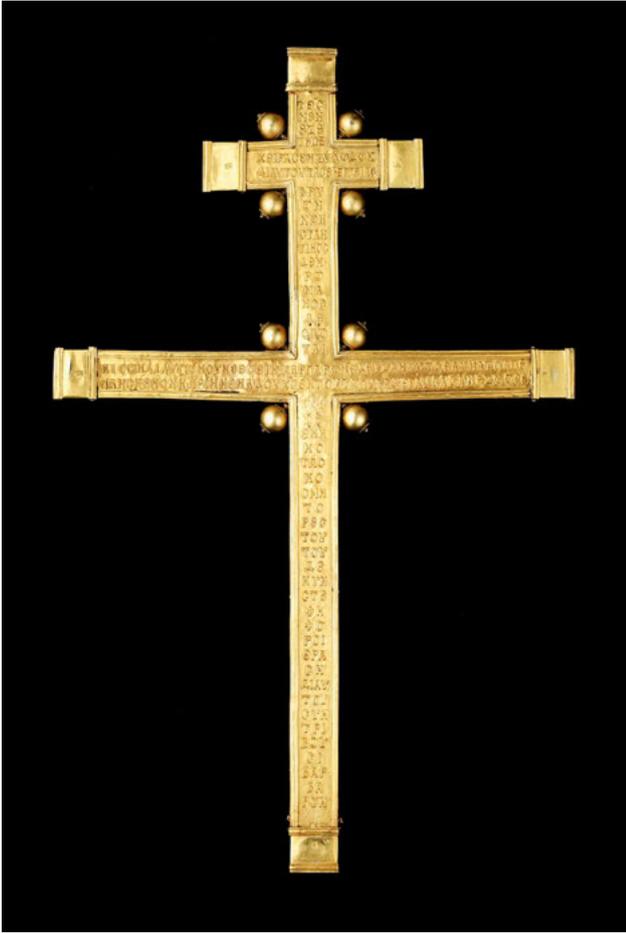


Fig. 3 Limburg
Staurotheke,
Reliquary Cross.

στεφηφόρος who, out of utmost philanthropy, wore the ἀκάνθινος στέφανος for the redemption of sins and the salvation of humankind on the very wood they adorned. This reading may be taken even further if we consider the tone of Basil's own inscription that remains largely visible when the covering lid is removed:

No beauty had He, who was hanged on the Wood / And yet, in death even, Christ surpassed all in beauty. / While He had no comely form, He embellished my / Unsightly face disfigured by sin and transgression. / For, though He was God, He suffered in mortals' nature / Since Basil the Proedros highly revered Him / He greatly embellished the box of the wood / On which He was stretched and embraced all creation.

The emphasis of the inscription is squarely on Christ's dual nature as a condition and source for the salvation of humankind and the forgiveness of sins. Sins and transgressions are considered the reason for Basil's disfigurement, made visible in the unsightliness of his face, which Christ embellished just like Basil embellished the box for the wood, on which Christ had hung and embraced all creation. It is interesting to note in this context that there is, as Cynthia Hahn recently emphasized, a long exegetical tradition that considers Christ's thorny crown as an image of the sins of humankind.²⁸ In his commentary on Matthew, Origen (d. 253) already speculated that Christ, "in taking up the scarlet robe, took upon himself the blood of the world, and in that thorny crown plaited on his

²⁸ See Hahn 2015, 195–196.

head, he took upon himself the thorns of our sins.”²⁹ Two centuries later, Chromatius of Aquileia (d. 407) similarly pointed out in his treatise on Matthew that the

crown of thorns which the Lord received on his head stands for our community [...]. At one time we were thorns that is to say sinners. Believing now in Christ, we have become a crown of righteousness [...], and we surround his head with our profession of faith [...]. A reed was placed in the Lord’s right hand so that with heavenly notation he might pardon our misdeeds or inscribe his law in our hearts with divine letters.³⁰

In the context of this exegetical tradition, of which I only cite the earliest representatives, Basil’s inscription on his staurotheke and the assembled relics of four instruments of Christ’s Passion, namely the cross, the crown of thorns, the purple cloak and the sponge, take on an altogether stronger meaning, one that is focused equally on the disfiguring tortures and mockery endured by Christ and the redeeming effects of his suffering on Basil’s sins and transgressions.³¹

Yet another aspect of the inscriptions is worth noting. Despite their necessarily fragmentary nature, the relics assembled behind small doors in Basil’s precious reliquary container are referred to in their inscriptions not as parts of a whole, but as complete objects. The inscription does not read “of the Crown of Thorns of the humanity-loving Christ our Lord,” but “*the* Crown of Thorns of the humanity-loving Christ our Lord. Not “of the purple cloak of the life-giving Jesus Christ,” but “*the* purple cloak of the life-giving Jesus Christ,” and so on.

It is difficult to assess whether the metonymic relationship between the whole and the part as spelled out in inscriptions like the one on the Limburg Staurotheke contributed to the notion that the imperial palace was indeed in the possession of the Crown of Thorns in its entirety and thus created Western expectations of a physical object, venerated and used in the liturgical and ceremonial life of the capital, but it is one scenario that may explain the subsequent fabrication of the Crown of Thorns both as an idea and a thing.³²

While the crown, or at least a portion of it, is now attested for the imperial palace for the late tenth century, the written sources continue to be reticent about its use and function. One of the few scraps of evidence that allow us a glimpse of the crown’s use in the context of palace rituals is a scant note in Raymond d’Aguilers’s account of the First Crusade, which attests that when the armies of the First Crusade passed through Constantinople in 1097, Emperor Alexios I (1081–1118), made their leaders swear “on the cross of the Lord and the Crown of Thorns, and many other holy objects” and promise not to keep for themselves any formerly Byzantine cities or castles they would be able to re-conquer.³³

As reports about the secular and religious treasures of Constantinople filtered back to Western Europe through the accounts of pilgrims and historians of the Crusades, expectations to see and venerate the Crown of Thorns and other relics preserved inside the imperial palace started to mount, resulting in a steady flow of distinguished visitors, who, like Louis VII of France in 1147 or Henry the Lion in 1172, begged for permission to see and behold those things which, in the words of John Kinnamos, “having been close to the body of Christ, are considered signs of divine protection by Christians.” It may not be considered too far-fetched to assume that it was this intense pressure from Western visitors to come, see, and venerate a real Crown of Thorns that ultimately

²⁹ Origen, *Werke*, ed. E. Klostermann, E. Benz, et al., vol. 11: Matthäuserklärung, Die lateinische Übersetzung der Commentariorum Series, 2nd ed., GCS 38 (Berlin, 1976), 261–62. Translation after Simonetti 2002, 285.

³⁰ *Chromatii Aquileiensis Opera*, ed. R. Étaix and J. Lemari, CCL 9a (Turnhout, 1974), 90–91. Translation after Simonetti 2002, 286.

³¹ On the issue of Basil’s disfigurement, see Pentcheva 2007.

³² On the issue of fragment versus whole, see Hahn 2015, 203–214.

³³ Raymond d’Aguilers, *Historia Francorum qui ceperunt Iherusalem: Le »liber« de Raymond d’Aguilers*, ed. J. Hugh and L. L. Hill, DRHC 9 (Paris, 1969), 93: “Imperatori iuravimus super dominicam crucem et spineam coronam, et super multa alia sancta, quia nec civitatem nec castellum de omnibus pertinentibus ad imperium eius retineremus sine eius voluntate”. See also Frolow 1961, Nr. 256, 286; Klein 2004, 66.

resulted in an effort to produce the visible and tangible proof for its existence in the full and double meaning of the word. Nikolaos Mesarites's account, cited earlier, may be seen as the endpoint in this process, which re-connects in interesting ways with a much earlier tradition that had reached the West directly from Jerusalem and is expressed in a passage from Gregory of Tours's *Glory of the Martyrs*:

With regard to the lance, the reed, the sponge, the crown of thorns, and the column on which the Lord and Redeemer was whipped at Jerusalem [...] they say that the thorns of the crown appear as if alive. But if its leaves seem to have withered, every day they become green again because of divine power [...].³⁴

It was this evergreen crown that captured the imagination of Western visitors for centuries, led to the invention of fanciful accounts of Charlemagne's translation of the relic from Constantinople to Aachen in the eleventh century, and was eventually acquired by the French King Louis IX in 1239 from his cousin, Emperor Baldwin II.³⁵ When the Crown of Thorns left Constantinople for Venice and Paris, its history as a real rather than an imagined object of veneration and symbol of divine kingship only just began. But this is a different story that deserves its own proper investigation.

³⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH ScriptRerMerov 1:2 (Hannover, 1885), 42.15–19. Translation after Van Dam 1988), 27.

³⁵ On the Crown of Thorns and the Western Imagination, see Hahn 2015.

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Fig. 1–3: Limburg an der Lahn, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum, D 1/1 and 1/2, ca. 945–959 (cross) and 963–985 (*theke*).