

SAINTS AND SACRED MATTER

The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond



Edited by

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MATERIALITY AND THE SACRED

Byzantine Reliquaries and the Rhetoric of Enshrinement

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IN ONE OF HIS LETTERS TO EUSTOCHIUM, ST. JEROME, AT THE BEGINNING of the fifth century, recounted the itinerary and experiences of the Blessed Paula as she visited various sites and places in the Holy Land, and especially in Jerusalem:

She chose a humble cell and started to go around visiting all the places with such burning enthusiasm that there was no taking her away from one, unless she was hurrying on to another. She fell down and worshipped before the Cross as if she could see the Lord hanging on it. On entering the Tomb of the Resurrection she kissed the stone, which the angel removed from the sepulcher door; then, like a thirsty man who has waited long, and at last comes to water, she faithfully kissed the very shelf on which the Lord's body had lain. Her tears and lamentations there are known to all Jerusalem—or rather to the Lord himself, to whom she was praying.¹

For Paula and other pilgrims like her, visiting sites and monuments associated with Christ's Passion and Resurrection meant to experience physical places and seemingly ordinary things in an unusual and altogether extraordinary manner. Pilgrims like Paula did not merely touch holy places and things. They became, as Gary Vikan has stressed, at least briefly, iconically one and the same with them, collapsing time through the transformative power of physical touch and *imitatio*.² Falling down before a replica of Christ's Cross in Jerusalem, most likely erected in the courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre under Emperor Theodosius the Great, Paula worshipped not only as if she could physically see Christ's body hanging upon it, she became quite literally an eyewitness of his Crucifixion *in* her worship.³ Likewise, kissing the very stone on which Christ's body had lain in the Sepulchre and shedding tears lamenting his death was transformative in the sense that it rendered her at once a pilgrim and one of the mourning Marys visiting

1 Jerome, *Epistulae*, ed. I. Hilberg, CSEL 55, 2nd ed. (Vienna, 1996), *Ep.* 108.9 (315.4–10), trans. after J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, rev. ed. (Warminster, 2002), 83.

2 G. Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi's Clothing: The Impact of Mimesis on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. R. Ousterhout (Urbana, 1990), 101. On the collapsing of time in the pilgrim's experience, see also chaps. 5 and 6 by Cox Miller and Krueger.

3 On the memorial cross on Mount Golgotha, see *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 1:86.26–87.5. For an English translation, see C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford, 1997), 135–36. See also I. Kalavrezou, "Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. H. Maguire (Washington, DC, 1997), 53–79, at 57–58; K. Holum and G. Vikan, "The Trier Ivory, Adventus Ceremonial and the Relics of St. Stephen," *DOP* 33 (1979): 115–33, here 127; K. Holum, "Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421–422 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory," *GRBS* 18 (1977): 153–74, at 163.

Christ's tomb and witnessing his Resurrection centuries earlier. What the story of the blessed Paula reveals is that pilgrimage was at once a spatial and a temporal practice as it enabled a collapsing of time through the experience of physical space and matter.⁴ It also stresses the crucial role of the senses in the production of a pilgrim's religious experience. Seeing and touching holy sites and objects were the means by which the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical, the earthly and the heavenly realms dissolved and the pilgrim could experience the history of salvation in real time.

Let me add to Jerome's account from the early fifth century two more from the later sixth. In his book *In Praise of the Martyrs*, Gregory of Tours shares two stories with us that relate the experiences of pilgrims at holy sites, one at the Oratory of the Holy Cross in Poitiers, the other at the tomb of St. Peter in Rome as pictured on the famous Pola Casket, a late fourth- or early fifth-century ivory box that likely served as a reliquary:⁵

The tomb [of St. Peter] is located beneath the altar and is quite inaccessible. Whoever wishes to pray comes to the top of the tomb after unlocking the railings that surround the spot. A small opening is exposed, and the person inserts his head in the opening and requests whatever is necessary. . . . If someone wishes to take away a blessed relic, he weighs a little piece of cloth on a pair of scales and lowers it into [the tomb]; then he keeps vigils, fasts, and earnestly prays that the power of the apostle will assist his piety. What happens next is extraordinary to report! If the man's faith is strong, the piece of cloth, when it is

raised from the tomb, will be so soaked with divine power that it will weigh much more than it weighed previously; and the man who raised [the cloth] then knows that by its good favor he has received what he requested.⁶

A pilgrim's faith and earnest prayer, we are told, is able to activate sacred matter, namely the body of St. Peter in his tomb, in an extraordinary way. It can trigger, through divine intervention, a measurable—that is, a physical—change to an ordinary thing such as a piece of cloth that a pilgrim lowers into St. Peter's tomb.⁷ The second story Gregory recounts is concerned with the relics of both Christian martyrs and the True Cross at Poitiers, where Queen Radegund had been responsible for their acquisition and enshrinement in a convent she had founded:

Often I heard, how even the lamps that were lit in front of these relics bubbled up because of the divine power and dripped so much oil that frequently they filled a vessel underneath. But because of the foolishness of my closed mind I was never motivated to believe these stories until that power which at present being revealed reproved my slow-witted hesitation . . . For that reason, I will describe what I saw with my own eyes. . . . I entered the convent . . . and bowed before the venerable cross and the holy relics of the saints. Then, at the conclusion of my prayer, I stood up. To my right was a burning lamp that I saw was overflowing with frequent drips. I call God as my witness, I thought that its container was broken, because placed beneath it was a vessel into which the overflowing oil dripped. I turned to the abbess and said: "Is your thinking so irresponsible that you cannot provide an unbroken lamp in which the oil can be burned, but instead you use a cracked lamp

4 On pilgrimage as a spatial and temporal practice, see above, 99–109.

5 Venice, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. no. 1952-279. See M. Bagnoli, H. A. Klein, C. G. Mann, and J. Robinson, eds., *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (Baltimore, 2010), no. 16, 40 (with bibliography); D. Longhi, "Il lato sinistro della capsella di Samaugher e la memoria costantiniana di S. Lorenzo," *Felix Ravenna* 141/144 (1997): 95–128; M. Guarducci, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher: Un cimelio di arte paleocristiana nella storia del tardo Impero* (Trieste, 1978); A. Gnirs, "La basilica e il reliquiario d'avorio di Samagher presso Pola," *Atti e Memorie della Società Istriana di Archeologia e Storia Patria* 24, no. 2 (1908): 5–48. See also Yasin, chap. 7 above, esp. 135–36.

6 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH ScriptRerMerov 1:2 (Hannover, 1885), 484–562, chap. 27, 54. English translation after Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, trans. R. Van Dam, Translated Texts for Historians, Latin Series 3 (Liverpool, 1988), 45.

7 On the practice of weighing relics, see J. McCulloh, "From Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change in Papal Relic Policy from the Sixth to the Eighth Centuries," in *Pietas: Festschrift für B. Kötting*, ed. E. Dassmann and K. S. Frank (Münster, 1980), 313–24, esp. 317–18.

from which the oil drips?” She replied: “My lord, such is not the case, it is the power of the holy cross you are watching.” Then I . . . remembered what I had heard earlier. I turned back to the lamp that was now heaving in great waves like a boiling pot, overflowing in swelling surges throughout the hour. . . . Stunned I was silent, and finally I proclaimed the power of the venerable cross.⁸

As in the case of the body of St. Peter and the ordinary cloth that the pilgrim lowered down into his tomb, here, an ordinary substance, namely lamp oil, changed its natural properties through physical proximity to the True Cross of Christ, after being activated by honest prayer and contemplation.

What these and other stories ultimately proclaim is that there exists a special category of things which function on a physical or sensuous level as well as on a spiritual or metaphysical one, things that not only transcend the boundaries between matter and spirit, earth and heaven, life and death, part and whole, but contain elements of both or collapse these categories altogether. This essay is about such things, extraordinary things, to be sure, things that can be classified as neither pure objects nor pure signs, and whose qualities and characteristics strangely hover between subject and object, presence and absence, signifier and signified, human and divine. I am not only talking about relics, the earthly remains of saints and martyrs, and objects sanctified through touch or physical proximity with a holy person or sacred substance, which are thus endowed with divine agency. I am also talking about reliquaries, the precious containers made to hold and behold such sacred or spirited matter, objects that often take on the properties of the very things they contain and are thus both subject to and object of sacred contagion. But relics and their containers are, as Caroline Bynum recently stressed concerning the late medieval period, by no means the only type of “holy matter” that functioned in such extraordinary ways—we have already heard about ordinary oil and cloths which were transformed by touch or mere proximity to holy matter, and in

turn became objects of veneration and agents of miraculous cures themselves.⁹ In addition to in-between objects such as the famous *mandylion* of Edessa, which is both relic and image, and its equally famous counterpart, the *keramion* (or *keramidion*), miraculously created when the former was pressed against a brick in an effort to keep the holy image safe, we may also think of more ordinary man-made images and sculptures that started bleeding, moving, and speaking, and Eucharistic bread and wine which in some instances were subject to similar transformations or resisted abiding by the physical laws of nature.¹⁰

Since the late 1980s, the heightened interest especially among anthropologists, but also among social and cultural historians, in issues of thingness, materiality, and the agency of objects, and the subsequent rise of “thing theory,” has put such phenomena as described by Jerome, Gregory of Tours, and other early Christian and medieval authors back in focus for historians of medieval art and religion. As Aden Kumler and Christopher Lakey recently remarked in their introduction to a special issue of *Gesta*, titled *Res et significatio: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages*, such a material turn among art historians not only of the middle ages has a strangely belated quality, especially in light of our discipline’s historical roots, which “privileged modes of attention to the material specificity of works of art, stressing the significance of the choice of materials, of facture, and of physical condition as crucial criteria in the dating, localization, authentication, and—more broadly—interpretation of works of art.”¹¹ For historians of medieval art

9 C. W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011).

10 The literature on this topic is vast. On the *mandylion* of Christ and associated objects, see G. Wolf, C. Dufour Bozzo, and A. Calderoni Masetti, eds., *Mandylion: Intorno al Sacro Volto, da Bisanzio a Genova* (Milan, 2004), with reference to the most important literature; also G. Wolf and H. L. Kessler, eds., *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation* (Bologna, 1998); E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (Leipzig, 1899). On the materiality of images and miraculous transformations, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, passim. See also eadem, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, 2007).

11 A. Kumler and C. Lakey, “Res et Significatio: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages,” *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (2012): 1–17, here 1.

8 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ed. Krusch, 40, trans. Van Dam, 23–24.

and religion, issues of materiality lie at the very core of a wide range of theological debates and controversies. John of Damascus, for instance, addressed the issue whether God can be circumscribed in visual form and whether images of him can receive veneration as one bound up in the question how God's divinity relates to physical matter. He proclaims:

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, and accepted to dwell in matter, and worked out my salvation through matter. . . . I salute matter with reverence because God has filled it with his energy (*energeia*) and his grace (*charis*). Is not the three-times-precious and three-times-blessed wood of the cross matter? Is not the holy and august mountain, the place of the skull, matter? Is not the life-giving and life-bearing rock, the holy tomb, the source of the resurrection, matter? Is not the ink and the all-holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the life-bearing table, which offers to us the bread of life, matter? Is not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and tablets and bowls are fashioned? And, before all these things, is not the body and blood of my Lord matter?¹²

Despite John's insistence on the centrality of matter in God's divine plan for salvation and its potential to become infused with his divine energy and grace, he draws a sharp distinction between created matter that deserves reverence, and the creator, who alone deserves veneration. However, the distinction he draws ultimately collapses in Christ himself, whose blood and body deserve not just reverence like ordinary matter but veneration as the creator, who became matter for the salvation of humankind.

The paradox of Christ's dual nature is presented here and elsewhere in John's treatise as a theological argument and justification for the veneration of material images of Christ and other objects infused with his divine energies and

12 John of Damascus, *Treatise* 1.16 (2.14), ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, PTS 17 (Berlin, 1975), 3:105–6; English translation after A. Louth, *St. John of Damascus: Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY, 2003), 29–30. See also chap. 1 by Elsner, above.

grace. As Patricia Cox Miller points out, such an embrace of paradox as argument was widespread among Christian authors of late antiquity, especially with regard to the cult of martyrs and relics. Ambrose of Milan, for instance, described the relics of the saintly martyrs Gervasius and Protasius as bits of “heaven on earth” and his contemporary Prudentius insisted that the relics of St. Vincent, though buried beneath an altar, were “drenched and drinking in the breath of heavenly bounty.”¹³ Another early impresario of the cult of relics, who employed paradox as a powerful argument for a different kind of seeing and sensing that is required to understand the notion of spirited matter, is Victricius of Rouen.¹⁴ In his well-known sermon *De laude sanctorum*, composed in 396 to celebrate the arrival of a gift of relics from his colleague Ambrose of Milan, Victricius addressed the vexing issue whether a saint's healing and intercessory power was as great in a small fragment of his bones, flesh, and blood as it was in the saint's whole and undivided body:

There is nothing in relics which is not complete. Where the healing power is intact, the limbs are intact. We say that flesh is held together by the glue of blood, and we affirm that the spirit also, wet with the moisture of blood, has taken on the fiery heat of the Word. . . . In relics, then, there is a reminder of perfection, not the injustice of division. . . . Why, then, do we call them “relics”? Because words are images and signs of things. Before our eyes are blood and clay. We impress on them the name of “relics,” because we cannot do otherwise with the seal of living language. But now, by uttering the whole

13 See above, 100 with reference to Ambrose, *Ep.* 22 (PL 16:1019–25), ed. M. Zelzer, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera, pars decima*, CSEL 82.3 (Vienna, 1982), 126–40, trans. M. M. Beyenka, *St. Ambrose: Letters*, Fathers of the Church 26 (Washington, DC, 1987), 376–84, and Prudentius, *Liber Peristephanon* 5.519, ed. M. Lavarenne, *Prudence*, vol. 4, *Le Livre des Couronnes, Dittochaëon, Épilogue* (Paris, 1963), 90. Also for a discussion of paradox, see C. J. Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400–circa 1204* (University Park, PA, 2012), 26, 28, and *passim*.

14 On the early impresarios of the cult of saints and their relics in late antiquity, see generally P. Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981). Hahn also discusses Victricius, *Strange Beauty*, 41–44, 60–61.

in the part, we open the eyes of the heart, not the barriers of our bodily sight. Things are not servants of words: words are servants of things. So let the ambushes of language be removed, and let thing war with thing and reason with reason. . . . If we said that relics were divided from the spirit, we would be right to look for all the connection and solidity of body parts. But when we realize that the substance is united [with the spirit], it follows that we are searching for the whole in the whole. Looking for a greater power would be an offense against unity. This confusion is of the eyes: the vision of reason is clearer. We see small relics and a little blood. But truth perceives that these tiny things are brighter than the sun, for the Lord says in the gospel: “My saints shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father” (Matthew 13:43).¹⁵

Victricius was not alone in his conviction that relics required a different kind of seeing and an understanding of words as images and signs of things that transcend the perceived laws of nature. Victricius’s colleague Paulinus of Nola, for instance, advised his friend Sulpicius Severus to behold with his “inner eye” the small sliver of the True Cross he had sent him to Primuliacum in Gaul: “Let not your faith shrink,” he says “because the eyes behold evidence so small; let it look with the inner eye on the whole power of the cross in this tiny fragment. Once you realize that you behold the wood on which our Salvation, the Lord of Majesty, was hanged with nails while the world trembled, you, too, must tremble, but you must also rejoice.”¹⁶ With regard to the bodies of saints, Victricius’s words were still mirrored centuries later in the Latin West, when abbot Thiofrid of Echternach, in his famous *Flores epitaphii sanctorum* of around 1100, explains that these tiny things shine brighter than the sun “because the saints have

been transformed from earthly to heavenly clarity. They are able to emit celestial light and cause their earthly remains to shine. They illuminate their dead bodies from above.”¹⁷

If the bones of Christian martyrs were believed to be connected with their heavenly bodies by a strong and invisible bond that required a special kind of seeing, and if tiny fragments of the True Cross were considered to contain the power of the whole instrument of Christ’s Passion and human salvation, then sacred or spirited matter must indeed be considered a very special kind of “stuff” that not only behaves in unexpected and extraordinary ways but also requires special treatment and handling. It is this kind of special treatment and handling by late Roman and Byzantine artists that I would like to address in the remainder of this study.

Following the logic of Thiofrid’s argument, objects that were made to contain matter that had come into contact with the body and blood of Christ, such as pieces of wood from the True Cross, and vessels that held the earthly remains of saints or things sanctified by physical contact with them, such as the pieces of cloth we heard about earlier, can ultimately be considered to function as conduits between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, embodying the central paradox that the physical remains of God’s saints on earth and the vestiges of Christ’s life and passion partake in the divine logos and thus can be venerated as sacred *metonymies*. If one accepts Seeta Chaganti’s notion of enshrinement as “a principle of complex enclosure,” then reliquaries can also be considered objects that actively blur the boundaries between interior and exterior, container and contained, thus providing aesthetic as well as epistemological structure to apprehend the paradox inherent in the Christian notion of sacred or spirited matter.¹⁸ What I am interested in here is an exploration of a few instances of medieval and especially Byzantine strategies of display and the use of a rhetoric of enshrinement, in which words, images, and sacred matter were employed synthetically in an effort to break the

15 Victricius of Rouen, *De laude sanctorum*, ed. R. Demeulenaere and J. Mulders, CCSL 64 (Turnhout, 1985), 67–93. English translation after G. Clark, “Victricius of Rouen, Praising the Saints,” *JEChrSt* 7, no. 3 (1999): 389–92.

16 Paulinus of Nola, *Epistulae*, ed. W. von Hartel, CSEL 29 (Vienna, 1894), ep. 31, 268.11–19. Translation after P. G. Walsh, *The Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, 2 vols. (Westminster, MD, 1966–67), 2:126. Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 15.

17 Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, ed. M. C. Ferrari, CCCM 133 (Turnhout, 1996), 2.7, p. 53.

18 S. Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York, 2008), 19.

“seal of living language,” as Victricius called it, and to transcend the barriers of bodily sight.

Little material evidence survives from the earliest shrines made to contain the bodies of Christian martyrs. Early texts, such as the account of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp of Smyrna, tell us precious little about the size, material make-up, and formal appearance of the earliest Christian reliquaries, emphasizing only that the martyr’s disciples placed his bones, which they considered “more precious than precious stones and finer than refined gold,” in a “suitable place or container.”¹⁹ Did the urn for the ashes of St. Polycarp look any different from urns that held the remains of less privileged Christian dead? How was the body of St. Babylas enshrined when it was transferred from a cemetery outside of Antioch to the suburb of Daphne in 354 AD? And how were the relics of SS. Andrew, Luke, and Timothy carried to Constantinople in 356 before they were interred underneath the altar of the church of the Holy Apostles? In these and most other cases the relics’ containers are not described in any detail in contemporary or later sources. As they were intended for reburial, they likely took the shape of simple stone or marble sarcophagi or coffins made of wood or lead. Later depictions in Byzantine manuscripts such as the Menologion of Basil II (fig. 12.1) in the Vatican Library preserve a distant memory of such shrines, but few identifiable examples have survived or have been recorded.²⁰ A replica of the much-disintegrated cedar coffin found in the nineteenth century during excavations at the church of St. Paulinus in Trier (fig. 12.2) preserves the shape and decoration of what may indeed have been the wooden chest in which the holy corpse of St. Paulinus, a bishop of Trier who died in exile in Phrygia, was carried back to Germany and interred in a cemetery outside the city in 395.²¹

19 Translation after *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. B. D. Ehrman, Loeb 24 (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 355–401, at 393.

20 For the Vatican Menologion (Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1613), see H. Evans and W. Wixom, eds., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843–1261* (New York, 1997), no. 55 (100–101); J. M. Plotzek, K. Winnekes, and S. Kraus, eds., *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: Liturgie und Andacht im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1992), no. 19, 114–15 (with further bibliography).

21 Paulinus, who succeeded Maximinus as bishop of Trier in 346, was exiled following the synod of Arles in 353. His body

The burial or reburial of a martyr’s entire body, however, tended to be the exception rather than the rule for later periods. Contemporary witnesses are rarely forthcoming when they describe how traces of blood, bits of dust, and fragments of bones were enshrined for burial inside, underneath, or in front of a church altar. Paulinus of Nola is a rare exception. A *titulus* composed for his church at Fundi comments on the church’s relics:

Under the lighted altar a royal slab of purple marble covers the bones of holy men. . . . Here lie father Andrew, the gloriously famed Luke, and Nazarius, a martyr glorious for the blood he shed; here are Protasius and his peer Gervasius. . . . One simple casket embraces this holy band, and in its tiny bosom embraces names so great.²²

Paulinus chose his words for maximum rhetorical effect, contrasting the greatness of the names assembled with the smallness and simplicity of the casket chosen to hold them. His words bring to mind such seemingly “simple” caskets as this miniature sarcophagus (fig. 12.3, right), excavated in the sanctuary of an early Christian church at Varna, Bulgaria, recently on view in the exhibition *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*.²³ Upon closer inspection, the simple marble reliquary revealed a somewhat more complex silver reliquary, wrapped in a silken pouch (fig. 12.3, left). This in turn revealed a small golden shrine, decorated

was allegedly brought back to Trier by Bishop Felix (d. ca. 400). The first church of St. Paulinus was built shortly thereafter, above his grave. The stone sarcophagus and cedar wood casket containing the saint’s remains was first opened in 1402 under Probst Friedrich Schaward, and once again in 1883 under Pastor Friedrich von Kloschinsky. For Schaward’s detailed description of the first opening of the sarcophagus, see P. Schmitt, *Die Kirche des h. Paulinus in Trier, ihre Geschichte und ihre Heiligtümer* (Trier, 1853), 182–84; F. Hettner, “Der Fund im Grab des ‘heiligen Paulinus’ zu Trier: Eine vorläufige Notiz,” *Westdeutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kunst* 3 (1884): 30–35.

22 Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 32, ed. von Hartel, 292–93. Translation after P. G. Walsh, *Letters*, 2:150–51.

23 Varna, Museum of Archaeology, inv. no. III.766–68. See Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, no. 15a–c, pp. 38–39; A. Minchev, *Early Christian Reliquaries from Bulgaria, 4th–6th Century AD* (Varna, 2003), nos. 1–3, 15–18 (both with further bibliography).



FIG. 12.1
Vatican City, Biblioteca
Apostolica Vaticana,
Cod. gr. 1613, p. 353
(photo courtesy
Biblioteca Apostolica
Vaticana)



FIG. 12.2
Trier, Erzbischöfliches
Diözesanmuseum,
replica of the cedar
coffin of St. Paulinus
(photo courtesy author)

FIG. 12.3
Varna, Museum of Archaeology, set
of three reliquaries (photo courtesy
Museum of Archaeology, Varna)



FIG. 12.4 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, set of two reliquaries (photo courtesy Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien)



FIG. 12.5 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, marble reliquary, Gift of Miriam N. Rosen, 2002 (2002.483.3a, b) (photo courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



FIG. 12.6 Kansas City, Ferrell Collection, oval-shaped silver reliquary (photo courtesy James Ferrell Collection)

with garnets and precious stones (fig. 12.3, center). In more than one instance, two or three precious reliquaries have been found nested inside one another, with the largest being made of wood or marble, indicating not only an effort to safeguard the precious relic by surrounding it with protective layers but also following a hierarchy of materials, which get more refined and less earthbound the closer they are to the precious matter they ultimately contain. This hierarchy of forms, materials, and decoration is characteristic of several late antique reliquaries such as the marble, silver, and gold containers excavated at the Cathedral of Pola in Istria in 1860 (fig. 12.4a–b), now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.²⁴

Despite their stunning visual decoration, such reliquaries were often deposited within the fabric of church altars and were thus removed

permanently from the eyes of the faithful.²⁵ Nevertheless, inscriptions often provided the name or names of pious donors to express the reason or purpose of their donation. A small marble reliquary preserved in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 12.5) simply states that it was made “In fulfillment of a vow [by] John the bishop.”²⁶ Another one, made of silver, now in a private collection (fig. 12.6), was inscribed with an elegant cross and uses the formulaic invocation “For the repose of

25 On relic deposits in or under a consecrated altar, see most recently U. Peschlow, “Altar und Reliquie: Form und Nutzung des frühbyzantinischen Reliquienaltars in Konstantinopel,” in *Architektur und Liturgie: Akten des Kolloquiums vom 25. bis 27. Juli in Greifswald*, ed. M. Altripp and C. Nauerth (Wiesbaden, 2006), 175–202; H. Brandenburg, “Altar und Grab: Zu einem Problem des Märtyrerkultes im 4. und 5. Jh.,” in *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective: Memorial Louis Reekmans*, ed. M. Lamberigts and P. van Deun (Leuven, 1995), 71–98.

26 New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 2002.483.3a, b. Unpublished.

24 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Antikensammlung, inv. no. VII 760–61. See most recently J. Spier, ed., *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (Fort Worth, 2007), no. 74, 251–52.



FIG. 12.7
Berlin,
Skulpturensammlung
und Museum für
Byzantinische Kunst,
Staatliche Museen
zu Berlin (photo
courtesy Antje Voigt–
SMB–Museum für
Byzantinische Kunst

the souls of Antoninos and Leontia, and for the salvation of Symeonios and Maria.²⁷

In other contexts, reliquaries could remain more or less accessible to local communities and pilgrims, who sometimes traveled long distances to embrace, as Gregory of Nyssa says, the “living body” of a saint with all their senses and to address him or her with humble prayers and personal petitions for intercession.²⁸ Especially in Syria, but also in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean such reliquary sarcophagi, such as an example at Salamis on Cyprus, were often displayed in the side chapels of churches and were thus able

27 Kansas City, The Ferrell Collection. See J. Spier, *Treasures from the Ferrell Collection* (Wiesbaden, 2010), no. 194, 268–69.

28 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Praise of the Blessed Theodore, the Great Martyr*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 10.1, *Sermones II*, ed. J. P. Cavaros (Leiden, 1990), 61–71, here 63. For a translation of the passage in question, see E. Kitzinger, *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Bloomington, IN, 1976), 121–22.

to play a more active role in the devotional and liturgical life of a community. Drill holes on the lid and lower front of many such reliquaries, for instance this sarcophagus-shaped shrine in Berlin (fig. 12.7), attest to the practice of infusing oil with the curative power of a saint, a fairly widespread practice during the fifth and sixth centuries, allowing direct access to a saint’s relics within the framework of a particular shrine or church.²⁹ While the reliquaries themselves often remained sparsely decorated, contemporary authors such as Paulinus of Nola, Gregory of Nyssa, Prudentius, and others emphasize the important contribution of the visual arts in creating a “wrap-around environment” in which, as Patricia Cox Miller, Liz James, Ruth Webb, and others have emphasized, mere bones could become relics and wield their miraculous powers.³⁰

Gregory of Nyssa’s panegyric description of the shrine of St. Theodore at Amaseia paints a vivid picture of such an environment:

God’s temple is brightly adorned with magnificence and is embellished with pictures of animals. . . . It exhibits images of flowers made in the likeness of the martyr’s virtues, his struggles, sufferings, . . . the athlete’s blessed consummation and the human form of Christ presiding over all these events. They are like a book skillfully interpreting by means of colors, which express the martyr’s struggles and glorify the temple with resplendent beauty. . . . These spectacles strike the senses and delight the eye by drawing us near to [the martyr’s] tomb, which we believe to be both a sanctification and blessing. . . . The body appears as if it were alive and healthy:

29 Among the many surviving examples, compare a reliquary in Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, inv. no. 1/88. See Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, no. 4, p. 32 (with further bibliography).

30 See P. Cox Miller, “The Little Blue Flower is Red: Relics and the Poetizing of the Body,” *JECbrSt* 8, no. 2 (2000): 213–36; eadem, “Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity,” *JECbrSt* 12, no. 4 (2004): 391–411; eadem, “Relics, Rhetoric, and Mental Spectacles,” in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. G. de Nie, K. F. Morrison, and M. Mostert, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 14 (Turnhout, 2005), 25–52; L. James and R. Webb, “To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places’: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium,” *AH* 14 (1991): 1–17.

the eyes, mouth, ears as well as the other senses are a cause for pouring out tears of reverence and emotion. In this way one implores the martyr who intercedes on our behalf and is an attendant of God for imparting those favors and blessings, which people seek.³¹

It is this powerful interplay among monumental church decoration, liturgical furnishings, and movable objects we have to imagine if we want to grasp the full experience of a pious pilgrim whether at a major cult center or a smaller church or chapel built in honor of a local saint or martyr. More than that, the experience at a saint's tomb was a multisensory one, not restricted to the eyes alone. Lamps filled with fragrant oil and incense burning at a saint's tomb stimulated the olfactory senses, while the noises and jostling of day- and nighttime processions animated throngs of pilgrims to experience otherwise familiar settings in a new and positively unfamiliar way.

Byzantine saints' lives provide a rich source of information for such events. The *vita* of the fifth-century St. Elisabeth the Wonderworker, for instance, written anywhere between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, describes how the saint's parents participated in the annual, week-long festival in honor of St. Glykeria, a second-century martyr of their hometown Herakleia in Thrace.³² The *vita* relates that Elisabeth's parents Euphemia and Eunomianos

participated in processions and all-night doxologies and visited the holy shrines throughout the city, shrines which contained the sacred relics of the forty holy women, and Ammos the deacon, and of many others. And so, venerating these saints and giving them due honor, they feasted and celebrated with the populace, carrying with them in procession throughout the city the ever-venerated head of the martyr Glykeria, who



FIG. 12.8
Tekirdağ, Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, reliquary stele (photo courtesy author)

was beheaded for the sake of Christ. While the divine liturgy was being celebrated by Leo, who was bishop of the city at that time, Eunomianos frequently gazed at the head of St. Glykeria, noticing her sometimes smiling slightly as though happy and sometimes with a sad and gloomy expression. He considered this to be a visible symbol of his trust in the martyr and he found his soul divided between happiness and sadness.³³

Interestingly, the shrine that used to hold and present to the faithful the head of St. Glykeria is preserved in the archaeological museum of Tekirdağ (fig. 12.8).³⁴ Taking the shape of a stele,

31 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Praise of Blessed Theodore* 63.

32 Vita of St. Elisabeth the Wonderworker (BHG 2121), ed. F. Halkin, "Sainte Elisabeth d'Héraclée, abbesse à Constantinople," *AB* 91 (1973): 249–64 with corrections by W. Lackner, *AB* 92 (1974): 287–88. For the English translation see V. Karras, in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. A.-M. Talbot, *Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation* 1 (Washington, DC, 1996), 117–35.

33 *Holy Women*, 124.

34 Tekirdağ, Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, inv. no. 671. See M. Hamdi Sayar, *Perinthos-Herakleia (Marmara*



FIG. 12.9

Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Museo Sacro, reliquary of St. Sebastian (photo courtesy Vatican Museums)

the shrine was recarved from an ancient door-jamb or lintel, and is associated with the rebuilding of the church of St. Glykeria under emperor Basil I. Below a semicircular cavity that once held the head of Glykeria, an inscription reads:

This lovely stone encloses like a shrine the divine head of the miracle-working martyr Glykeria. From it flows a steady stream of miracles that gives strength to the suffering. May everyone approach this holy heart with faith, and quickly you will see your wishes fulfilled. Like a fountain of bubbling life, you will all experience her mercy.³⁵

This inscription sums up in a poignant way the main tenets of the medieval cult of relics as it emphasizes the life-giving and miracle-working qualities of the saint's body part enshrined and presented to those who approach it with faith. What is interesting here is that the shrine presents the relic to the beholder in an open *loculus*, once secured with iron bars. Above the *loculus* a series of holes indicate that the likeness of the saint's head was once featured there, probably as a metalwork or enameled appliqué. Relic and image are thus brought in close proximity to each other and enhance the saint's physical presence in both likeness and substance. The inscription adds a third dimension by explaining the shrine's function and the miracle-working qualities of the saint, whose simultaneous presence in heaven and on earth made her a powerful intercessor. Of course, we cannot be sure how the relic was presented to the beholder inside the *loculus* or during the weeklong festival and its



FIG. 12.10 Halberstadt, Domschatz, head relic of St. James (photo courtesy LDA Sachsen-Anhalt, J. Lipták)

Ereğlisi) und Umgebung: Geschichte, Testimonien, Griechische und Lateinische Inschriften, Veröffentlichungen der Kleinasiatischen Kommission 9 (Vienna, 1998), no. 243, 383–85. See also J. H. Mordtmann, "Zur Epigraphik von Thracien," *Archäologisch-Epigraphische Mitteilungen aus Österreich-Ungarn* 8 (1884): no. 62, pp. 226–27; E. Kalinka and J. Strykowski, "Cathedra von Herakleia," *ÖJhBeibl* 1 (1898): 13–28.

³⁵ Author's translation. For the Greek text, see Sayar, *Perinthos-Herakleia*, 383.



a



b

public processions. Perhaps the saint's skull was further enshrined in a simple silver reliquary such as the one for the head of St. Sebastian in Rome (fig. 12.9).³⁶ Perhaps it was further adorned with pearls and precious stones like the skull presented around 570 to the anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza, who described it in an account of his visit to the church of Mount Sion in Jerusalem: "I saw a human head enclosed in a reliquary of gold adorned with gems, which they say is that of St. Theodota, the martyr. Many drink out of it to gain a blessing, and so did I."³⁷ Like the

36 Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Museo Sacro, inv. no. 60864. See most recently Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, no. 19, p. 42 (with further bibliography).

37 *Antonini Placentini Itinerarium*, ed. P. Geyer, CSEL 175 (Turnhout, 1965), 127–74, here 165.1215: "Ibi est monasterium puellarum, et ibi uidi testam hominis inclusam in loculo aureo

skull of St. James (fig. 12.10) brought back to the Cathedral of Halberstadt by bishop Konrad following the sack of Constantinople in 1204, the alleged head of Theodota may have been framed by metal bands of silver and adorned with the saint's portrait.³⁸ We will never know for sure.

ornato gemmis, quae dicunt esse capud martyris Theodote. In qua multi aquam pro benedictione bibebant et ego bibi." Translation after J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, rev. ed. (Warminster, 2002), 140.

38 Halberstadt, Domschatz, inv. no. 19. Concerning the skull of St. James see most recently H. Meller, I. Mundt, and B. E. H. Schmuhl, eds., *Der Heilige Schatz im Dom zu Halberstadt* (Regensburg, 2008), no. 10, pp. 66–67. See also P. Janke, *Ein heilbringender Schatz: Reliquienverehrung am Halberstädter Dom im Mittelalter* (Munich, 2006), no. 22a, pp. 220–22; G. Toussaint, "Die Sichtbarkeit des Gebeins im Reliquiar—eine Folge der Plünderung Konstantinopels?" in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, ed. B. Reudenbach and G. Toussaint, *Hamburger Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte* 5 (Berlin, 2005), 89–106.

FIG. 12.II
"Limburger Staurothek,"
Limburg, Dom- und
Diözesanmuseum
(photo: M. Benecke,
courtesy Dom- und
Diözesanmuseum
Limburg)

What we do know, however, is that St. Glykeria sometimes smiled at its pious beholders, as witnessed by Eunomianos. The story highlights a development that—gradually but forcefully—took shape in Byzantium roughly from the sixth through the tenth century and which witnessed an ever more direct and meaningful way of connecting images visibly with sacred substances and objects that contained them. A clear tendency toward the reflexive use of images and sacred matter can already be observed in works of the sixth century, such as the Vatican Box with stones from the Holy Land (fig. 6.1), in which earth and stones from places in and around Jerusalem were connected with scenes from the Life and Passion of Christ to create a meaningful bond between the experience of the pilgrim and the history of salvation.³⁹ However, such strategies become a distinct and carefully calibrated mechanism of Byzantine reliquary design only after the end of Iconoclasm. The shrine of St. Glykeria is a first step in this direction, using words and images, and words *as* images to “open the eyes of the heart,” as Victricius put it, and allow the faithful to see the saint smiling upon them.

By the tenth century, reliquaries such as the Limburg Staurotheke (figs. 12.11a–b) present the precious relic in a well-crafted *kosmos* of words and images that provide a carefully constructed commentary on the sacred substance enshrined and a lasting memory of the donor’s hopes and wishes bound up in his commission of the relic’s precious container.⁴⁰ The reliquary thus becomes a “speaking reliquary”—what German scholars have described as a *redendes Reliquiar*—not by

39 Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Museo Sacro, inv. no. 61883.2.1–2. See most recently Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, no. 13, pp. 36–37 (with further bibliography); see also above, chap. 6, 111–31.

40 Limburg an der Lahn, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum, inv. no. D 1/1–3. See most recently H. A. Klein, “Die Limburger Staurotheke und der Kreuzkult in Jerusalem und Konstantinopel,” in *Im Zeichen des Kreuzes: Die Limburger Staurotheke und ihre Geschichte*, ed. A. Heuser and M. T. Kloft (Regensburg, 2009), 13–30. See also B. Pentcheva, “Containers of Power: Eunuchs and Reliquaries in Byzantium,” *Res* 51 (2007): 108–20; N. Ševčenko, “The Limburg Staurotheke and Its Relics,” in *Thymiama ste mneme tes Laskarinas Mpura*, ed. R. Andreade (Athens, 1994), 289–94; J. Rauch, “Die Limburger Staurotheke,” *Das Münster* 8 (1955): 205–12; E. Aus’m Weerth, *Das Siegeskreuz der byzantinischen Kaiser . . . in der Domkirche zu Limburg an der Lahn* (Bonn, 1866), 6–8.



FIG. 12.12 Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, reliquary arm of the apostles, gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust, 1930.739 (photo courtesy The Cleveland Museum of Art)

virtue of its form, but by virtue of its combined use of text and image in a process Anthony Cutler has recently described as *synphrastic*, denoting the synergies that characterize works of art in which images, inscriptions, materials, and the manner in which they were handled all work together, each factor reinforcing a statement made by the other.⁴¹

Unlike many western body-part-shaped reliquaries of the high middle ages such as the so-called Apostle Arm Reliquary in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 12.12, a classic example of a speaking reliquary),⁴² the Limburg Staurotheke follows the panel-shaped format common to most Byzantine reliquaries of the True Cross.⁴³ The reverse of the double-arm reliquary cross (fig. 12.13), placed in a similarly shaped recess in the panel's center, carries a verse inscription that reads:

+ God stretched his hands on the Wood,
Gushing forth through it the energies 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.⁴⁴

41 A. Cutler, "Synphrasis," in *Thirty-Sixth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference: Abstracts of Papers* (Philadelphia, 2010), 24. Cutler borrows the term from its use in 21st-c. art criticism and Kelly Grovier's review on Cy Twombly in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 May 2009, 12–18.

42 Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art, gift of John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust, 1930.739. See most recently Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, no. 40, pp. 83–84; H. A. Klein, ed., *Sacred Gifts and Worldly Treasures: Medieval Masterworks from the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland, 2007), no. 38, pp. 122–23 (with further bibliography).

43 On the formal development of Byzantine *staurothekai* and its impact on western artists, see H. A. Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das wahre Kreuz: Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland* (Wiesbaden, 2004). See also H. Belting, "Die Reaktion der Kunst des 13. Jahrhunderts auf den Import von Reliquien und Ikonen," in *Il medio Oriente e l'Occidente nell' arte del XIII secolo*, ed. idem, *Atti del XXIV Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell'Arte 2* (Bologna, 1982), 35–54.

44 *BEiÜ* 2:163–69 Mc8, my translation. On the verse inscriptions see generally J. Koder, "Zu den Versinschriften der Limburger Staurothek," *AmrhKg* 37 (1985): 11–31; W. Michel, "Die Inschriften der Limburger Staurothek," *AmrhKg* 28 (1976): 23–43; E. Follieri, "L'ordine dei versi in alcuni epigrammi bizantini," *Byzantion* 34 (1964): 447–67. For a more recent attempt at an interpretation of the inscriptions, see



It is generally accepted that the emperors named in this inscription are Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (908–959) and his son Romanos II (959–963), who reigned jointly from April 945 to November 959.⁴⁵ A second verse inscription, which

B. Pentcheva, "Räumliche und akustische Präsenz in byzantinischen Epigrammen: Der Fall der Limburger Staurothek," in *Die kulturhistorische Bedeutung byzantinischer Epigramme*, ed. W. Hörandner and A. Rhoby (Vienna, 2008), 75–83.

45 While it is theoretically possible that the emperor Romanos mentioned in the inscription could be identified with Romanos I Lekapenos (920–944), who reigned for the underage Constantine VII, such an identification seems somewhat unlikely given both the sequence of names as they appear in the inscription and the historical circumstances of his rule.

FIG. 12.13 Limburg, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum, reliquary cross (reverse) (photo courtesy Dom- und Diözesanmuseum, Limburg)



FIG. 12.14
Paris, Musée du Louvre, “Harbaville Triptych” (photo courtesy Reunion des Musées nationaux/Art Resource, NY)

surrounds the outer perimeter of the panel-shaped reliquary’s front, supplements the information given by the first inscription. It states:

+ No beauty had He, who was hanged on the Wood,
And yet, even in death, 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.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *BEiÜ* 2:163–69 Me9. The exact reading of these verses and the circumstances of their execution have been much debated. See Koder, “Versinschriften,” 11–31; Follieri, “Ordine dei versi,” 447–67. Pentcheva has recently advocated Follieri’s reading, which I follow here. However, the problem of how the inscription was *actually* read in its closed and opened states is far from resolved.

The Proedros Basileios, mentioned in this second inscription, is a well-known figure, of course. Born as an illegitimate son of Emperor Romanos I, he was made a eunuch, likely at an early age, and rose quickly in the administrative hierarchy of the imperial court.⁴⁷ Since the title *proedros* is prominently recorded in the verse inscription, the reliquary's date of production is commonly assigned to the years between 963, when Emperor Nikephoros bestowed this title on Basil, and 985, when he suddenly lost imperial favor and was exiled to the shores of the Bosphoros.⁴⁸

Apart from the two verse inscriptions, artfully applied in gold and silver repoussé, the reliquary is decorated with pearls, precious and semiprecious stones, as well as icons of holy figures, vegetal motifs, and geometric patterns, all executed in either cloisonné enamel or repoussé. In its closed state, it features a central grid of nine square enamel plaques divided by rows of rubies and emeralds. Surrounded by his apostles, Christ is depicted enthroned on the central plaque, flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist in intercessory poses and two archangels, one on each side, an image formula that can be found on a number of contemporary works such as a Middle Byzantine ivory triptych at the Louvre (fig. 12.14).⁴⁹

Once opened, the reliquary reveals the precious double-arm reliquary cross, flanked on all sides by ornamental and figural cloisonné enamels. Along its vertical arm, ten angelic figures, some dressed in court costume and others in imperial

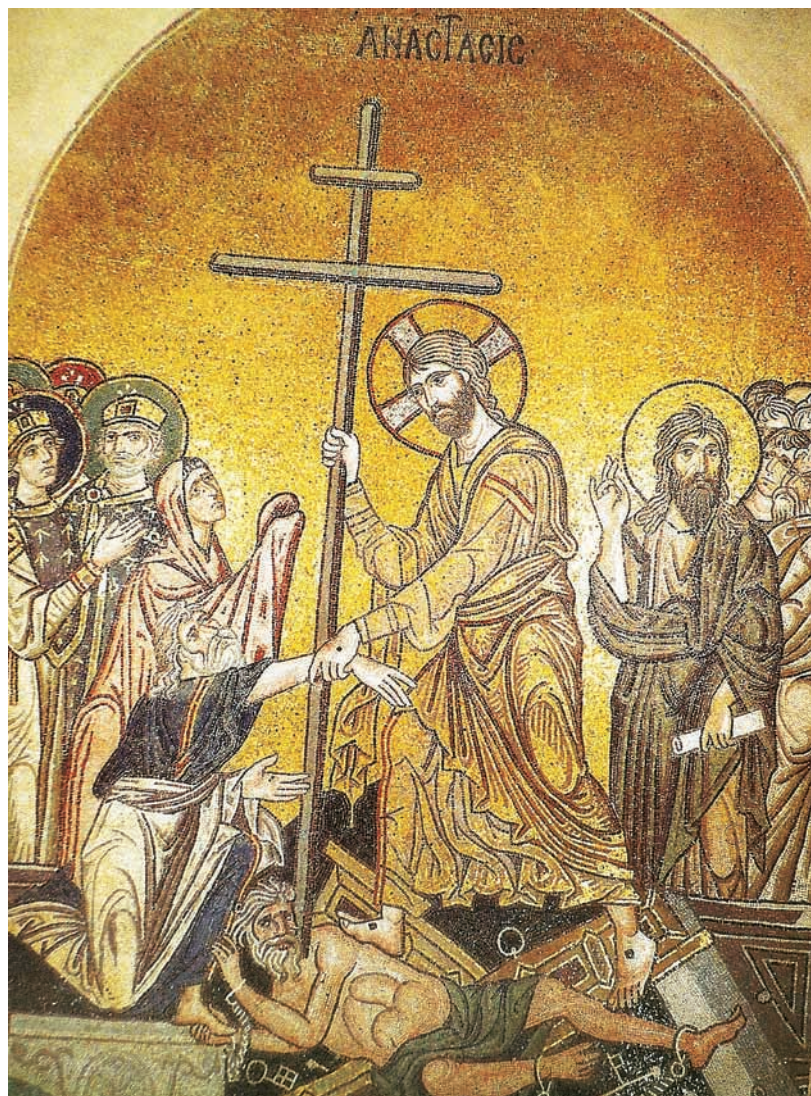


FIG. 12.15
Monastery of Daphni,
Anastasis (photo
Philip Tallon; Creative
Commons)

loroi, form the relic's heavenly guard. Next to these, ten further plaques, double in width, are decorated with two orders of angels identified as *exousiai* ("powers") and *archai* ("principalities"). The plaques they decorate function as doors that concealed ten additional relics: six of Christ's Passion, three of the Virgin, and one of St. John the Baptist. The identities of the relics contained are spelled out in short inscriptions, placed between each pair of powers and principalities.

Completing the design and image program of the reliquary is the representation of a large double-arm cross on the reliquary's back. Mirroring the overall shape and position of the sacred relic contained behind it, the cross is studded with gems and pearls, raised on four steps, and flanked by a pair of mighty acanthus leaves

47 On Basil Lekapenos, see most recently Pentcheva, "Containers of Power," 107–20; K. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, 2003), 92 and 129–32; W. G. Brokaar, "Basil Lekapenos," in *Studia bizantina et neohellenica Neerlandica* 3 (1972), 199–234; M. Ross, "Basil the Proedros Patron of the Arts," *Archaeology* 11 (1958): 271–75. J. M. Featherstone, "Basileios Nothos as Compiler: The *De Ceremoniis* and Theophanes Continuatus," in *The Transmission of Byzantine Texts*, ed. I. Perez Martin et al. (Turnhout, 2014), 355–74.

48 See Brokaar, "Basil Lekapenos," 203–34.

49 Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. OA 3247. See most recently R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki, eds., *Byzantium, 330–1453* (London, 2008), no. 77, pp. 137, 400–401 (with further bibliography). See also J. Durand and M. Durand, "A propos du triptych de Harbaville quelques remarques d'iconographie, médio-byzantine," in *Patrimoine des Balkans Voskopoyë sans frontières 2004* (Paris, 2005), 133–55; Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium* (n. 20 above), no. 80, pp. 133–34.



FIG. 12.16
New York,
Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
plaque with
Crucifixion and
the Stabbing of
Hades, gift of
J. Pierpont Morgan,
1917 (17.190.44)
(photo courtesy
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art)

sprouting from its stem. Two six-pointed stars, placed between the cross arms on either side, complete this highly charged image, for which close parallels can once again be found in the realm of middle Byzantine ivory carving. In the case of the Limburg Staurotheke, the life-giving power of the cross seems to extend beyond the confines of its palmette-lined frame onto the reliquary's sides. They, too, bear witness to the life-giving forces of the wood contained within it, representing a continuous frieze of blossoming acanthus tendrils, framing exquisitely wrought leaf motifs.⁵⁰

50 For a more extensive description and analysis of the reliquary, see Klein, *Byzanz*, 104–11.

Much has been written in recent years about the interplay between texts and images in Byzantine art, a development that has sharpened our understanding and appreciation for the fact that objects often speak in more than one tongue, as it were, and that they sometimes respond to other works or monuments that preceded them.⁵¹ Through their poetic inscription or mere descriptive titles, objects like the Limburg Staurotheke quite literally speak to us in words that, animated by the reader, give silent or audible expression to a pious donor's identity, hopes, and intentions.⁵² They explicate the historical, spiritual, or doctrinal significance of a depicted subject or a venerated object, and achieve both in a simultaneous and sometimes reflexive conjunction of words, images, and sacred matter. Their interplay is of utmost importance for our understanding and interpretation. Let me exemplify this with the last few lines of the poem inscribed on the reverse of the relic:

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.

For an educated Byzantine of the tenth century, it would have been difficult to read these words without thinking of images that show Christ smashing the gates of Hades, such as a slightly later mosaic of the Anastasis at the monastery of Daphni (fig. 12.15).⁵³ Interestingly, in the majority of representations of the Anastasis,

51 See most recently K. Krause and B. Schellewald, eds., *Bild und Text im Mittelalter* (Cologne, 2011). See also Chaganti, *Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary* (n. 18 above); L. James, ed., *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* (Cambridge, 2007); A. Papalexandrou, "Text in Context: Eloquent Monuments and the Byzantine Beholder," *Word and Image* 17 (2001): 259–83.

52 See Pentcheva, "Räumliche und akustische Präsenz," 75–83; A. Papalexandrou, "Echoes of Orality in the Monumental Inscriptions of Byzantium," in James, *Art and Text*, 161–87. Whether the inscriptions on the Limburg staurotheke were actually read out loud during the ritual veneration of the True Cross, as Pentcheva claims, cannot be as easily determined.

53 On the monastery of Daphni and its decorative program, see G. Millet, *Le Monastère de Daphni* (Paris, 1899); E. Diez and O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaics in Greece: Hosios Lucas and Daphni* (Cambridge, 1931). More recently C. Bouras, "The Daphni Monastic Complex Reconsidered," in *Aetos: Studies in Honour of Cyril Mango*, ed. I. Ševčenko and I. Hutter (Stuttgart, 1998), 1–14; R. Cormack, "Rediscovering the Christ Pantokrator at Daphni," *JWarb* 71 (2008): 55–74.

the instrument of Christ's victory over death is formed in the shape of a double-arm cross, a specific form first attested during Iconoclasm to distinguish the life-giving relic of the True Cross from other representations of the cross of Christ. In the Daphni mosaic and other representations, such as a tenth-century ivory plaque at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 12.16),⁵⁴ the True Cross is quite literally used to smash the Gates of Hades, allowing Christ to lead "the dead from death to life." An inscription on the ivory explains the curious iconography with the words: "the Cross is stuck in the bowels of Hades," but here again, the words of the inscription in tandem with the image would have conjured up other words, in particular a poem of Romanos the Melodist, likely composed for the celebration of Good Friday, in which he gives expression to the struggles of Hades at the time of the Crucifixion. Here, Hades asks:

Who has fixed a nail in my heart?
 A wooden lance has suddenly pierced me and
 I am being torn apart.
 My insides are in pain, my belly in agony,
 my senses make my spirit tremble,
 and I am compelled to disgorge
 Adam and Adam's race. Given me by the Tree,
 A Tree is bringing them back again to
 Paradise.⁵⁵

Words, images, and sacred matter are tied together in the Limburg Staurotheke in an intricate web of meanings that trigger in the viewer new word-image associations. Although now lost, the particular liturgical or ceremonial environment in which this production of new associations was meant to unfold its meaning plays an important role in our understanding of these objects.

54 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.44. See Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 97, pp. 152–53; M. Frazer, "Hades Stabbed by the Cross of Christ," *MMJ* 9 (1974): 153–61.

55 J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode: Hymnes*, SC 128 (Paris, 1967), 38.1 (286.5–11). Translation after *St. Romanos the Melodist, Kontakia on the Life of Christ*, trans. E. Lash (London, 1995), 155–56. For a recent assessment of the hymns of Romanos in connection with the Metropolitan plaque, see G. Frank, "Death in the Flesh," in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, ed. C. Hourihane (Princeton, 2010), 58–74.



a



b

FIG. 12.17
 Moscow, State
 Historical
 Museum
 and Cultural
 Museum
 "Moscow
 Kremlin"
 (photo courtesy
 State Historical
 Museum,
 Moscow)



FIG. 12.18
Mount Athos, Great
Lavra, reliquary of
St. Demetrios (photo
after K. Loverdou-
Tsigarida 2004)

I should like to address this issue by way of two final examples associated with St. Demetrios of Thessalonike. An eleventh-century silver gilt reliquary in the shape of a small octagonal shrine (fig. 12.17a) serves as a starting point.⁵⁶ Through an inscription, placed on its two lateral sides, the reliquary identifies itself with the words

56 Moscow, State Historical Museum and Cultural Museum “Moscow Kremlin,” inv. no. MZ 1148. See Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 36, pp. 77–78; A. Bank, *Byzantine Art in the Collections of Soviet Museums* (Leningrad, 1985), 308 (figs. 203–4); A. Grabar, “Quelques Reliquaires de saint Démétrios et de martyrium du saint à Salonique,” *DOP* 5 (1950): 3–28.

I am a true image of the ciborium of the lance-pierced martyr Demetrios. On the outside I have Christ inscribed, who with his hands crowns the fair couple. He who made me anew is John of the family of the Autoreianoï, by profession mystographos.⁵⁷

In this case, the reliquary is speaking, gaining a voice of its own and actively blurring the boundaries between inanimate object and animated subject.⁵⁸ The fair couple crowned by Christ is depicted on the back of the reliquary (fig. 12.17b) and has been identified as Constantine X Doukas (r. 1059–1067) and Eudokia Makrembolitissa “in Christ the Lord pious emperor and empress of the Romans.” On the reliquary’s front, a portal depicts the two military saints Nestor and Loupos, companions of St. Demetrios of Thessalonike, who seem to be guarding the reliquary’s sacred contents. Together with the inscription, the saints’ presence leaves little doubt that the miniature ciborium was made as a “true image” of the hexagonal silver ciborium known to have stood in the nave of the church of St. Demetrios in Thessalonike and attested as the focal point of the saint’s cult from at least the late sixth century until the period of Iconoclasm. As André Grabar argued more than sixty years ago, a small reliquary box at the Great Lavra on Mount Athos (fig. 12.18) probably once formed the interior shrine for the Moscow reliquary.⁵⁹ An inscription on the Lavra box proclaims: “Here is preserved the holy blood of the martyr Demetrios, confirming John’s faith and deep desire.”⁶⁰ Blood-soaked earth was one of two sacred substances miraculously produced at the shrine of St. Demetrios in Thessalonike. The other was myron, an oil-like substance that exuded from the saint’s body.⁶¹ John Staurakios, a

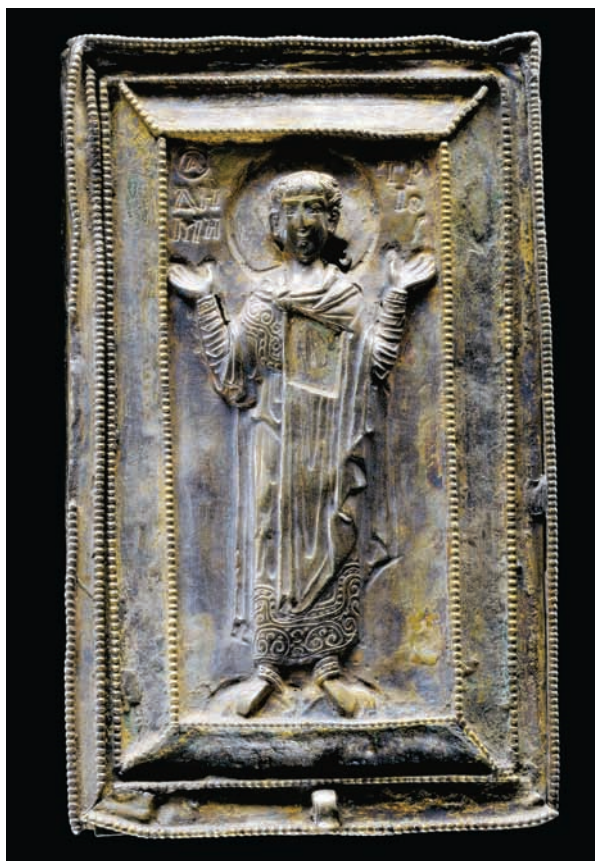
57 *BEiÜ* 2:285–87 Me99. Translation after Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 77.

58 On the origins and continued relevance of images and objects animated by their inscriptions, see H. Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin, 2010), 59–100. See also E. King et al., “Notes from the Field: Anthropomorphism,” *ArtB* 94, no. 1 (2012): 10–30.

59 Grabar, “Quelques Reliquaires,” 18–28.

60 *BEiÜ* 2:200–201 Me33. On the Lavra box, see K. Loverdou-Tsigarida, “Reliquaries of St. Demetrios in the Great Lavra,” in *Thorakion: Festschrift Pavlos Lazaridis* (Athens, 2004), 391–400.

61 On the cult of St. Demetrios in Thessalonike and the substances collected at his shrine, see C. Bakirtzis, “Pilgrimage



a



b



c

FIG. 12.19

Halberstadt, Domschatz
Halberstadt, silver reliquary
of St. Demetrios, inv. no. 24
(photo courtesy LDA Sachsen-
Anhalt, J. Lipták)

thirteenth-century *chartophylax*, describes how “men, women, and children extract the myron with their hands and straws and anoint their eyes, mouths, and ears with it along with their chests and their entire bodies. . . .”⁶² A small reliquary shrine in Halberstadt (fig. 19a), shaped like a miniature sarcophagus, was made to contain this sacred substance.⁶³ An image of St. Demetrios, dressed in court costume with his hands raised in prayer, decorates the reliquary’s sliding lid while a lengthy inscription around its sides speaks of the reliquary’s function:

Not blood alone but also myron I carry
The present tomb of the Martyr Demetrios
Granting healing to those who received it
through honest desire.⁶⁴

to Thessalonike: The Tomb of St. Demetrios,” *DOP* 56 (2002): 175–92; J. C. Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Civic Patron and Divine Protector, 4th–7th Centuries C.E.* (Harrisburg, PA, 1999).

62 John Staurakios, *Oration on the Miracles of St. Demetrios* 37.3–17; ed. J. Iberites, *Makedonika* 1 (1940): 334–76.

63 Halberstadt, Domschatz, inv. no. 24. See Meller et al., *Der Heilige Schatz* (n. 38 above), 54–59; Janke, *Ein heilbringender Schatz* (n. 38 above), no. 2C, pp. 141–43; A. Effenberger, *Byzantinische Kostbarkeiten aus Museen, Kirchenschätzen und Bibliotheken der DDR: Spätantike—Byzanz—Christlicher Osten* (Berlin, 1977), no. 110, pp. 57–58.

64 *BEiÜ* 2:156–57 Me5, my translation. For the Greek text, see Janke, *Ein heilbringender Schatz*, 143; Effenberger, *Kostbarkeiten*, 58.

Once the lid is removed, the sarcophagus reveals two square compartments covered by hinged double doors. The wings of the upper door show the full-length figures of Saints Loupos and Nestor, each identified by an inscription. The surviving wing of the door below represents St. Damian, suggesting that its now missing pendant once featured his twin brother and fellow physician Kosmas (fig. 12.19b). Opening the upper doors reveals a half-length image of St. Demetrios lying in his tomb (fig. 12.19c), hands crossed over his chest and eyes closed. Judging from the inscription, the lower door must once have given physical access to the martyr’s blood and myron, both believed to grant healing powers to those who approached the martyr’s tomb, as the inscription claims, “through honest desire.” Images of both the living saint and the martyr asleep in his tomb serve as generators of the saint’s presence, and the tomb itself speaks to the pious beholder, encouraging spiritual access to the saint as much as physical access to the healing substances associated with him. St. Demetrios and the shrine that served as the focal point for his veneration at Thessalonike have become movable and enshrinement itself has become a material practice of devotion. Like Victricius of Rouen, we still see “small relics and a little blood.” But with the help of art, we now perceive not just with our inner eye but all our senses that these tiny things are indeed brighter than the sun.