Chapter Twelve

Materiality and the Sacred
Byzantine Reliquaries and the Rhetoric of Enshrinement

Holger A. Klein

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 the Cross.

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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.
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. 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:

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.

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. 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.


6 Gregory of Tours, Liber in gloria martyrum, ed. B. Krusch, MGH ScriptRerMerov 12:2 (Hannover, 1885), 54–56, chap. 27.

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. Köting, 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

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 cadem, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia, 2007).
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 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 Victoricus 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, Victoricus 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


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).

Victoricius 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. Victoricius’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.” With regard to the bodies of saints, Victoricius’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.”

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. 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

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“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.” 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. 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.

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21 Paulinus, who succeeded Maximinus as bishop of Trier in 346, was exiled following the synod of Arles in 355. His body 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.


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)
permanently from the eyes of the faithful. 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.” 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...

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.

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


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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 panegyrical 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:


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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 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.
33 Holy Women, 124.
34 Tekirdağ, Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, inv. no. 671. See M. Hamdi Sayar, _Perinthos-Herakleia (Marmara_
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

_35_ Author’s translation. For the Greek text, see Sayar, Perinthos-Herakleia, 383.
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 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.

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

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\(^39\) Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Museo Sacro, inv. no. 61883.1–2. See most recently Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, no. 13, pp. 36–37 (with further bibliography); see also above, chap. 6, 111–31.

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

+ 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
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

*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.

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. Pentecheva 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. 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 Bosphorus.

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).

Once opened, the reliquary reveals the precious double-arm reliquary cross, flanked on all sides by ornamental and figural cloisonné enameals. Along its vertical arm, ten angelic figures, some dressed in court costume and others in imperial lvoi, 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 studed with gems and pearls, raised on four steps, and flanked by a pair of mighty acanthus leaves.


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, 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.


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.

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),\(^\text{54}\) 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.\(^\text{55}\)

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.


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 Autoreianoi, by profession mystographos.  

In this case, the reliquary is speaking, gaining a voice of its own and actively blurring the boundaries between inanimate object and animated subject. 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.  

An inscription on the Lavra box proclaims: “Here is preserved the holy blood of the martyr Demetrios, confirming John’s faith and deep desire.” 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.  

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. Through an inscription, placed on its two lateral sides, the reliquary identifies itself with the words


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

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.

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