

[Recepción del artículo: 01/07/2014]
[Aceptación del artículo revisado: 21/11/2014]

**ARCA ARCARUM: NESTED BOXES AND THE DYNAMICS OF
SACRED EXPERIENCE**

**ARCA ARCARUM: CAJAS ANIDADAS Y LA DINÁMICA DE LA
EXPERIENCIA SAGRADA**

HERBERT L. KESSLER

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD/Masaryk University, Brno
herbkessler@earthlink.net

For Shigebumi Tsuji

RESUMEN

Las cajas desempeñaron un papel importante en la construcción de la santidad en la Edad Media. Ellas estuvieron autorizadas por numerosas referencias en las escrituras hebreas y el Nuevo Testamento, especialmente el Arca de la Alianza y el Santo Sepulcro. Centrándose en la capilla relicario construido por el emperador Carlos IV en Karlstejn (Bohemia) y en el cuadro del siglo VII en el *Sancta Sanctorum* en Roma que contiene fragmentos de sitios de Tierra Santa, el artículo investiga los contenedores protagonizaron un proceso dinámico de ocultación y –sucesiva y privilegiadamente– revelación, para estimular sentimientos de misterio y temor religioso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ámpulas, Arca de la Alianza, Tumba de Cristo, Jerusalén Celeste, lugares de Tierra Santa, Karlstejn, reliquias, relicarios, capillas relicarios, *Sancta Sanctorum* de Roma, Vera Cruz.

ABSTRACT

Boxes played important roles in the construction of sanctity during the Middle Ages. They were authorized by numerous references in Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, notably the Ark of the Covenant and Holy Sepulcher. Focusing on the fourteenth-century reliquary chapel built by the Emperor Charles IV at Karlstejn (Bohemia) and on the seventh-century box in the *Sancta Sanctorum* in Rome containing fragments from Holy Land sites, the article investigates the ways containers staged a dynamic process of concealing and successive (and privileged) revealing to engender feelings of mystery and religious awe.

KEYWORDS: ampullae, Ark of the Covenant, Christ's tomb, Heavenly Jerusalem, Holy Land sites, Karlstejn, relics, reliquaries, reliquary chapels, *Sancta Sanctorum* in Rome, True Cross.

SCRIPTURAL PRECEDENTS AND TYPES

Containers engaged Christians from the start very beginning of the faith and were fundamental in the construction and experience of sacred places throughout the Middle Ages. Many factors contributed to the fascination with them, the basic one being the fact that they are apprehensible while their contents remain hidden, setting up an interplay between the physical object –and any representation or ornament on its exterior– and the unseen contents, between presence, that is, and desire. The sixth-century ivory Basilewsky *pyxis* in St. Petersburg (Hermitage Museum; Fig. 1) is a representative example of the dynamics involved¹. Reinforced by the lock, the very material of which the container is made creates the expectation that something precious is inside; and the depiction of Aaron conducting men bearing a ram and unleavened cakes to be sacrificed on the altar of the Holy of Holies, another container (Ex. 29), suggests that the new sacrifice God instituted to replace the carnal offerings of the Jews is hidden within, namely Christ's body in the Eucharistic wafers. The Epistle to the Hebrews underlies the conception: "He abolishes the [burnt offerings and sin offerings] to establish the second order, the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all" (10.10). When the deacon carried the *pyxis* to the altar and the priest opened it and removed and deployed its contents, the experience enacted the temporality of supersession, replacing the stationary Jerusalem Temple with the Christian covenant's universality. Portability was another feature that made boxes important.



Fig. 1. Sacrifice before the Tabernacle, Basilewsky *pyxis*, 6th c., St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum

¹ VOLBACH, W. F., *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz am Rhein, 1976, p. 117; ST. CLAIR, A., "The Basilewsky Pyxis: Typology and Topography in the Exodus Tradition", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 32 (1984), pp. 15-30; KESSLER, H. L., "Judaism and the Development of Byzantine Art", in *Jews of Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, BONFIL, R. et alii (eds.), Leiden, 2011, pp. 457-502.

The Bible is rife with references to containers. Among the best known, Noah's ark tapped another typology as a symbol of Christian salvation (1 Peter 3.20-21)². On a pre-Constantinian sarcophagus in Trier (Rheinisches Landesmuseum: Fig. 2)³, the ark sheltering Noah and family is equated with the box containing the mortal remains of the baptized faithful, their souls being returned to Paradise. Noah's Ark, rendered as a four-legged box labeled ΚΙΒΩΤΟΣ ΝΩΕΥ, occupies the center of a mosaic the basilica at Mopsuestia (Misis, Mosaik Musei), most likely in accord with John Chrysostom's likening it to the Church that saves all who have strayed⁴. Christ's tomb was even more significant, in which the Savior was laid and after three days arose, as represented on the fifth-century Maskell ivory in London (British Museum; Fig. 3)⁵, itself from a small casket. The fact that this box did *not* contain mortal remains was the point in this case, demonstrating the Resurrection, as the angel had proclaimed to the Maries: "He is risen: he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him" (Mt.16.6). Enshrined within the Holy Sepulcher (another container), the empty sarcophagus thus simultaneously affirmed both Christ's humanity and his divinity, activated by the viewer's experience of looking through the half-opened doors adorned on the exterior with reliefs of the Raising of Lazarus and a replica of one of the women opposite the angel and seeing the empty box inside. On the sixth/seventh-century *ampullae* from the Holy Land, for instance one in Washington (Dumbarton Oaks; Fig. 4)⁶, the absence---confirmed by the inscription quoting the angel---was compensated by oil collected at the site, a secondary relic that assimilates the venue's sanctity (not Christ's) and renders it transportable; in the remarkable St. Gereon Sacramentary in Paris (BnF, MS



Fig. 2. Noah and his Family in the Ark, 4th c., Trier, Rheinisches Landesmuseum

² MURRAY, C., *Rebirth and Afterlife. A Study of the Transmutation of Some Pagan Imagery in Early Christian Funerary Art*, Oxford, 1981; JENSEN, R. M., *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity. Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2012.

³ DRESKEN-WEILAND, J., *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, Mainz, 1998, pp. 130-131; *Picturing the Bible. The Earliest Christian Art*, SPIER, J. (ed.), New Haven, 2007, p. 208.

⁴ BUDDE, L., *Antike Mosaiken in Kilikien*, Vol. I *Frühchristliche Mosaiken in Misis-Mopsuhestia*, Recklinghausen, 1969; TALGAM, R., *Mosaics of Faith. Floors of Pagans, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy Land*, Jerusalem and University Park, PA, 2014, p. 321.

⁵ VOLBACH, *Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pp. 82-83; *Picturing the Bible*, pp. 229-232.

⁶ VIKAN, G., *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, rev. ed., Washington, 2010.



Fig. 3. Three Marys at the Tomb, 5th c., Maskell ivory, London, British Museum



Fig. 4. Three Marys at the Tomb, 6th/7th c., ampulla, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks

817, fol. 60r), the point is dramatized by picturing the sarcophagus' lid propped open and the angel sitting on top of it pointing emphatically at the interior occupied only with the vacant shroud. Two *tituli* make the point clear. Below: *Ecce locus ubi poseur[un]t eu[m]* and above: *Hic erit contemplandum quo modo angelus celestis testabat[ur] XPM resurrexisse a mortuis*⁷. The viewer is called on first to examine the place where Christ's corpus had been laid and, like the Maries, see with her or his own eyes that it is empty, and then to "contemplate" the miraculous resurrection.

Of the many biblical containers, the most important was the Ark of the Covenant⁸. Constructed according to God's specifications to protect and conceal the Ten Commandments, Aaron's staff, and manna (Ex. 31). As a protective box for most precious contents, it became a symbol of the Virgin Mary; and as the locus of Jehovah's presence and power, carried from place to place on four rings during the periods of exile, it was a proof-object in debates about the appropriateness of physical *sacrata*, including icons, in Christianity⁹. A picture in the San

⁷ BLOCH, P. and SCHNITZLER, H., *Die ottonische Kölner Malerschule*, Düsseldorf, 1967, vol. I, p. 42.

⁸ For depictions of the Tabernacle and Temple in both Jewish and Christian buildings, see now: TALGAM, *Mosaics*, pp. 227-234 et passim.

⁹ See my "Shaded with Dust: Jewish Eyes on Christian Art", in *Judaism and Christian Art. Aesthetic Anxieties from Catacombs to Colonialism*, KESSLER, H. and NIRENBERG, D. (eds.), Philadelphia, 2011. Among other texts, see: Leontius of Neapolis (first third of seventh century) in the Byzantine East and the *Opus caroli* (last decade of eighth century) in the Latin West; THÜMMEL, H. G., *Die Frühgeschichte der ostkirchlichen Bilderlehre. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Zeit von dem Bilderstreit*, Berlin, 1992, pp. 340-353; *Opus caroli regis contra synodum (Libri Carolini)*, Ann FREEMAN (ed.) (MGH. Concilia, Vol. II, suppl. I), Hannover, 1998, pp. 286-289 et passim. Pope Paschal I (817-24) reiterated the embedded argument in his letter to the Byzantine Emperor Leo V: ENGLER, A., "La difesa delle immagini intrapresa dalla chiesa di Roma nel IX secolo", in *Caelius I. Santa Maria in Domnica, San Tommaso in Formis e il Clivus Scauri*, Rome, 2003, pp. 257-284. See also: RAUCH, I., "Die Bundeslade und die wahren Israeliten. Anmerkungen zum mariologischen und politischen Programm der Hochchorfenster der Kathedrale von Chartres", in *Glas. Malerei. Forschung. Internationale Studien zu Ehren von Rüdiger Becksmann*, SCHOLZ, H. et al. (eds.), Berlin, 2004, pp. 61-71.

Paolo Bible of ca. 870 (Rome, Monastero di San Paolo, Bibbia, fol. 59v)¹⁰, for instance, illustrates the sacred box's power to part the Jordan and cause the Chosen People's enemies to fall in what, the accompanying *titulus* declares is a prefiguration of the "celestial kingdom"¹¹. In the desert Tabernacle's inner tent and, later, atop the *propitiatorium* in Solomon's Temple, the Ark was too dangerous to approach, as the San Paolo Bible Leviticus page shows (fol. 32v; Fig. 5)¹². It was accessible only on the Day of Atonement and by the High Priest alone, who entered the *Sancta Sanctorum* to sprinkle the sacrificed animal's blood on the altar in expiation of humankind's sins. The Carolingian frontispiece pictures the workers in the upper corners completing the physical tent which frames a hierarchy of sanctity that begins at the bottom where Moses and Aaron oversee the sacrifice outside the precinct, into which the *hoi polloi* desire to peer but are blocked by a curtain, continues within the outer courtyard where Aaron



Fig. 5. Tabernacle, 9th c., Rome, Monastero di San Paolo, Bible, fol. 32v

¹⁰ GAEHDE, J. E., "Carolingian Interpretations of an Early Christian Picture Cycle to the Octateuch in the Bible of San Paolo Fuori Le Mura in Rome", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 8 (1974), pp. 351-384; Id., "La decorazione. Le miniature", in *Commentario della Bibbia di San Paolo fuori le mura*, ARNALDI, G. (ed.), Rome, 1993, pp. 241-242.

¹¹ *In promptu est leuiticus liber, in quo singula sacrificia, immo singulae paene syllabae et uestes aaron et totus ordo leuiticus liber inspirant caelestia sacramenta*; DE BRUYNE, D., *Préfaces de la Bible Latine*, Namur, 1920, p. 3.

¹² GAEHDE, "Carolingian Interpretations", pp. 358-366; Id., "Decorazione", pp. 239-240.

anoints and instructs his five sons, and culminates with the High Priest's reaching up to (but not entering) the inner sanctum. A box within a box leads to a closed box on the altar flanked by cherubim and crowned by a candelabrum.

The material tent and Ark the San Paolo Bible miniature represents to the eyes themselves cover the true meaning. As Joachim Gaehde observed, green under-painting exposes the sequence's Christian significance. Cued by Jerome's preface (included in the Bible): "Each syllable, sacrifice, Aaron's vestments, and all the Levitical clergy exhale celestial secrets" and by its paraphrase of it in the accompanying *titulus*: "the whole ordinance of Leviticus, figurative in all ways, sends forth a sweet fragrance with the offering of heavenly gifts"¹³, the green designates a cross that passes through the parted curtain and Menorah, extends to the ark and altar (adorned with crosses), and ends at a small cross emblazoned on the parted canopy. Interpreting the literal words of the Old Law, the *caelesta sacramenta* refer, of course, to the Epistle to the Hebrews:

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. . . . When Christ came as a high priest . . . through the greater and perfect tent not made with hands, he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. Therefore, . . . we enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh). (Hebrews 7.15-10.20)

The belief that Christ had replaced the Old Testament sacrifices with his very person was embodied in the Ark of the Covenant in many later medieval works¹⁴. These include the well-known apse mosaic in Germigny-des-Prés ca. 816, for instance¹⁵, and the frontispiece of Ado of Asti's *Expositio in Psalmos* in Paris (BnF, MS lat. 2508, fol. IIv), probably illuminated at Farfa during the first quarter of the twelfth century, which pictures David and three co-Psalmsists composing his songs and, along side them, a Jewish High Priest holding a *pyx* in one hand and the head of a calf in the other, as two men sacrifice the animal. The translation appears above in the figure of Christ seated on a gemmed throne surrounded by the four evangelist symbols

¹³ *Totus passim typicus Laeviticus ordo/ dulciter aspirat caelestia dona ferendo.*

¹⁴ See my: "Through the Temple Veil: The Holy Image in Judaism and Christianity", in *Kairos*, 32/33 (1990/91), pp. 53-77 (repr. *Studies in Pictorial Narrative*. London, 1994, pp. 49-73) and "Medieval Art as Argument", in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, CASSIDY, B. (ed.), Princeton, 1993, pp. 59-70 (repr. in *Spiritual Seeing. Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia, 2000, pp. 53-63.); APPLEBY, D., "Rudolf, Abbot Hrabanus and the Ark of the Covenant Reliquary", *American Benedictine Review*, 46 (1995), pp. 419-43; HAMBURGER, J. F., "Body vs. Book: The Trope of Visibility in Images of Christian-Jewish Polemic", in *Ästhetik des Unsichtbaren. Bildtheorie und Bildgebrauch in der Vormoderne*, GANZ, D. and LENTES, T. (eds.), Berlin, 2004, pp. 112-145. On the Ark of the Covenant and reliquaries, see: HAHN, C., *Strange Beauty. Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400-circa 1204*, University Park, PA, 2012, pp. 239-244 et passim.

¹⁵ FREEMAN, A. and MEYVAERT, P., "The Meaning of Theodulf's Apse Mosaic at Germigny-des-Prés", *Gesta*, 40 (2001), pp. 125-139; DEBIAIS, V., "Mostrar, significar, desvelar. El acto de representar según las inscripciones medievales", *Codex Aquilarensis*, 29 (2013), pp. 169-186; FOLETTI, I., "Germigny-des-Prés, il Santo Sepolcro e la Gerusalemme Celeste", *Convivium. Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and Mediterranean. Seminarium Kondakovianum*, Series nova, I (2014), pp. 34-51.

and being ministered by a monk holding a book and a priest offering a chalice¹⁶. A box effects the move from one state of sanctity to the other; the Ark of the Covenant, represented as a legged chest encrusted with gems, is pictured at the very center of the page being censed by two High Priests, probably Aaron and Melchizedek. The juxtaposition makes the point clear: just as in Germigny, supersession is presented quite literally as a “sitting above.”

A twelfth-century addition on the flyleaf of the early ninth-century Apocalypse manuscript in Valenciennes (Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 99, fol. 2r; Fig. 6) makes the same point¹⁷. The frontispiece to John’s vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem described and illustrated on the pages that follows presents the imageless Jewish Tabernacle as a series of square boxes, the outer one labeled with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, the middle with the three Levite families, and the innermost square inscribed *Sancta Sanctorum*. As Bianca Kühnel noted, these boxes within boxes sit atop a fourth that they mostly obscure but allow the ends to emerge beneath; as in the San Paolo Bible, a discerning reader discovers the underlying form of a cross and, in that process, comes to understand the significance of the prefatory image as a cue to what follows.

The two monuments examined in the following essay exemplify the important place such successions of experiences had in intensifying the sanctity of medieval art and, at the same time, created a longing to move beyond the present world.

KARLSTEJN

The Ark of the Covenant typology was rendered with exceptional economy on the entry wall of the Virgin Mary Chapel that the Emperor Charles IV constructed ca. 1358-65 in his

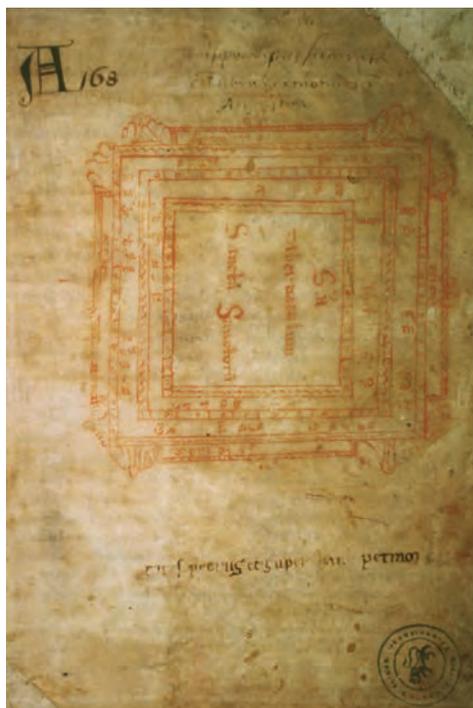


Fig. 6. Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 99, fol. 2r

¹⁶ TOUBERT, H., “Contribution à l’iconographie des psautes. Le commentaire des psaumes d’Odon d’Asti illustré à l’abbaye de Farfa”, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome*, 88 (1976), I, pp. 581-619; ENCKELL JULLIARD, J., *Au seuil du salut. Les décors peints de l’avant-nef de Farfa en Sabine*, Rome, 2008, p. 103.

¹⁷ KÜHNEL, B., *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Representations of the Holy City in Christian Art of the First Millennium*, Rome, Freiburg, and Vienna, 1987, pp. 162-63 (who suggests that the diagram in original to the ninth-century manuscript); KLEIN, P., “L’Apocalisse di Valenciennes. Il MS. 99 della Bibliotheca municipale”, *Alumina. Pagine miniate*, 10, no. 37 (2012), pp. 7-15.

castle at Karlstejn (Fig. 7)¹⁸. Elucidated by a passage from Revelation: “the ark of his testament [opened and] seen in his temple” (Rev. 11.19), the sacred chest represented as a four-legged box shown within enclosed in a Gothic chapel, its lid opened to reveal, not the holy things of the Hebrew covenant, but Christ himself, holding the orb of dominion and raising his hand in blessing¹⁹. The Emperor Charles had already realized one of the Ark’s typologies when he built a church/chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary on the ruins of the synagogue he had destroyed in Nuremberg in 1349²⁰. It may not be mere coincidence that the little building painted inside the chapel at Karlstejn, with its square outer space framed by buttresses set at an angle, adjoining an apse illuminated by three windows covered with (celestial blue) gothic vaulting resembles the earlier Frauenkirche.

Like the desert Tabernacle, Jerusalem Temple, and the pictured sanctuary itself, the Karlstejn chapel in which this image appears, is divided into two spaces. In the real room, the transition from the one to the other is effected by the window niche across opposite the



Fig. 7. Ark of the Covenant, Chapel of the Virgin, ca. 1358-65, Karlstejn Castle

¹⁸ *Magister Theodoricus. Court Painter to Emperor Charles IV. The Pictorial Decoration of the Shrines at Karlstejn Castle*, Fajt, J. (ed.), Prague, 1998, pp. 46-105; CROSSLEY, P., “The Politics of Presentation: The Architecture of Charles IV of Bohemia”, in *Courts and Regions in Medieval Europe*, JONES, S. R., MARKS, R. and MINNIS, A. J. (eds.), York, 2000, pp. 99-172; Hamburger, “Body vs. Book”, pp. 118-125.

¹⁹ HOMOLKA, J., “The Pictorial Decoration of the Palace and Lesser Tower of Karlstejn Castle”, in *Magister Theodoricus*, pp. 45-105.

²⁰ BRÄUTIGAM, G., “Die Nürnberger Frauenkirche. Idee und Herkunft ihrer Architektur”, in *Festschrift Peter Metz*, SCHLEGEL, U. and VON MANTEUFFEL, C. Z. (eds.), Berlin, 1965, pp. 170-197; CROSSLEY, “Politics of Presentation”, p. 124.

entrance and across from the painting (Fig. 8), where Christ appears again rising from a box holding the cross of resurrection as he emerges from his tomb (Fig. 9)²¹. Christ's sarcophagus is here made partly of actual stone (possibly of a later date) framed in gold, behind which actual relics were secreted; like the oil in the *ampullae* and the wafers in the Basilewsky *pyxis*, these replace the Savior's person (which was now with the Father) with physical objects that conserve something of his divine aura. Among those inventoried in the list below are stones from Christ's tomb, from the Virgin's grave, from the place of the Last Supper, from where Thomas touched Christ's wounds, from the place where Mary died, and from where Christ Ascended²². An enormous *Crux gemmata* fashioned of precious stones may recall the cross in situ in Jerusalem²³; but, set against a curtain-like painting "woven" with leaves, it evokes not only the curtain of the Epistle to the Hebrews, but also another ancient typology, pictured on the Holy Land *ampullae* (Fig. 10), too, namely, the belief that the cross is a new tree of life (from which it was constructed) that, through Christ's death, returns humankind to the walled-off Paradise²⁴. Recreating the experience of a tomb through its confinement and darkness, the



Fig. 8. Window niche, Chapel of the Virgin, ca. 1358-65, Karlstein Castle



Fig. 9. Resurrection of Christ, Chapel of the Virgin, ca. 1358-65, Karlstein Castle

²¹ HOMOLKA, "Pictorial Decoration", p. 84, Fig. 51.

²² HOMOLKA, "Pictorial Decoration", p. 84.

²³ See MÖSENDER, K., "Lapides vivi. Über die Kreuzkapelle der Burg Karlstein", *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 34 (1981), pp. 39-71.

²⁴ See KLEIN, H., *Byzanz, der Westen und das 'wahre' Kreuz. Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland*, Wiesbaden, 2004, pp. 115-117 et passim.



Fig. 10. Tree of Life,
6th/7th c., ampulla,
Monza Cathedral

niche reinforces the hope of salvation for those sitting on the benches waiting to enter the adjacent chapel also by means of a depiction of the Harrowing of Hell with Christ dragging Adam and Eve and other “Old Testament saints” from an enormous cave. The phenomenological recreation would have been engendered dramatically by the window itself that presumably once filtered light into the space through siliceous stone (of which a fragment still survives; Fig. 11), coarse matter transformed by the divine radiance. Pictures adjacent to the niche representing Charles IV receiving the Passion relics and inserting them into a cross, visible from the niche, complete the transition to a small inner chapel. The Emperor, wearing a miter beneath his imperial crown, is imagined here as Melchizedek, the king/priest at the entrance of his own sancta sanctorum. Inside, the stone-covered walls create the experience of the Heavenly Jerusalem that, through Christ’s death (pictured on the altar), replaced the earthly one. That experience culminated in the Holy Cross chapel above, with its dado of encrusted stones from which crosses emerge, its glimmering vaulting affixed with Venetian glass spheres, and the portraits of 130 saints with relics inserted into the frames, themselves the *lapides vivi* of



Fig. 11. Window fragment, ca. 1358-65, Karlstejn Castle

the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21)²⁵. The succession of anagogical objects and images reaches its climax at the altar, which is surmounted by an enormous niche for the Passion relics and imperial insignia and adorned with various images, including, prominently Christ as a man of sorrows within his tomb²⁶.

SANCTA SANCTORUM IN ROME

The deployment of images, relics, and successive spaces inserts Karlstejn into a line of chapels that engaged the Ark of the Covenant as a means of embodying sacredness. The immediate source is well-known: the Sainte Chapelle that King Louis IX had built in Paris for the relics acquired in Constantinople in 1239-41 installed above the altar in the container known as the *Grande Chasse*²⁷. The Emperor Charles had spent 1323-30 in the Parisian court and when

²⁵ MÖSENDER, “Lapides Vivi”.

²⁶ FAJT, J. and ROYT, J., “The Pictorial Decoration of the Great Tower at Karlštejn Castle”, in *Magister Theodoricus*, pp. 107-215; CROSSLEY, “Politics of Presentation”, pp. 146-147.

²⁷ See: BRANNER, R., *St. Louis and the Court Style*, New York, 1965; GRODECKI, L., *Sainte Chapelle*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1975; BILLOT, C., “La donation de saint Louis. Le collège de la Sainte-Chapelle”, in *Le trésor de la Sainte-Chapelle* (cat. of an exhibition), Paris, 2001, pp. 98-106; DURAND, J., “La grande Chasse aux reliques”, in *Trésor*, pp. 107-112; Mösender, “Lapides vivi.”

he returned at sixty-one years old in 1378, he examined the Ste. Chapelle relics individually²⁸. The precious relics had, in turn, been pillaged by the Crusaders from another royal church, the Pharos Chapel in the palace of the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople. Known only through written documents recently analyzed by Alexei Lidov²⁹, the Pharos Chapel was mentioned first in 769 and, by the twelfth century, included many Passion relics, including a fragment of the cross, a piece of stone from Christ's tomb, the lance, the Lord's sandals, and an icon "not made by human hands", the Mandylyon. Although none of the documents likens the Pharos Chapel specifically to the Old Testament Ark, a connection is implicit in the claim that the imperial inner sanctum housed the Ten Commandments and in an allusion (ca. 1200) to a *katapestasma*, the word used in the Septuagint for "the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek". A reference may also be intended in the application of the word *acheiropoieton* to the Mandylyon, an image of Christ not-made-by-human-hands superseding the Ark made-by-hand. As Lidov argues, the Pharos might, in turn, have recapitulated a relic chapel in Jerusalem, located on Adamnán's famous map between the church of the Holy Sepulcher and Constantine's basilica³⁰.



Fig. 12. Altar and *acheropita*, Rome, *Sancta Sanctorum*

For all its debt to Paris, and indirectly to Constantinople and Jerusalem (both then destroyed), Karlstejn also alludes to another palace chapel, the *Sancta Sanctorum* at the Lateran, (Fig. 12) where Charles was crowned emperor in 1355 just before he embarked on his own project.³¹ It is on that most important container of containers that I shall focus because, perhaps better than any other example, it demonstrates how nested boxes created and controlled the experience of sacrality.

The Pope's private chapel in the Lateran palace complex was known officially as the Oratory of St. Lawrence; as late as 1073, the primary source of information about it, John the Deacon's *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae*, referred to it simply as

²⁸ KOVÁČ, P., "Notes on the Description of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris from 1378", in *Court Chapels of the High and Late Middle Ages and their Artistic Decoration*, Fajt, J. (ed.) Prague, 2003, pp. 413-418.

²⁹ LIDOV, A., "A Byzantine Jerusalem. The Imperial Pharos Chapel as the Holy Sepulchre", in *Jerusalem as Narrative Space. Erzählraum Jerusalem*, HOFFMANN, A. and WOLF, G. (eds.), Leiden, 2012, pp. 63-103. See also: BACCI, M., "Relics of the Pharos Chapel: A View from the Latin West," in *Eastern Relics*, LIDOV, A. (ed.), Moscow, 2000, pp. 234-246.

³⁰ *Adamnan's De Locis Sanctis*, MEEHAN, D. (ed.), Dublin, 1958; OUSTERHOUT, R., "The Memory of Jerusalem: Text, Architecture, and the Craft of Thought", in *Jerusalem as Narrative Space*, pp. 139-154.

³¹ MÖSENDER, "Lapides vivi", p. 55.

the “ecclesia Sancti Laurentii in Palatio”³². Indeed, as Gerhard Wolf pointed out in his *Salus Populi Romani*, the first secure application of the term *Sancta Sanctorum* to the St. Lawrence Chapel occurs in Nicholas Maniacutius’ *Historia Imaginis Salvatoris* of ca. 1145; there, the allusion to the Jewish high priest is also indexed and the icon of Christ inside is declared to be superior to the Ark of the Covenant, where God appeared only in a cloud³³. Informal allusions to the chapel as a *sancta sanctorum* go back to the eighth century, however, but these seem simply to be popular recognitions of the Lawrence Chapel’s restricted access and, perhaps, to the pope’s custom, before saying Mass at the altar, of intoning the *Aufer a nobis*, “Take away from us our iniquities, that we may be worthy to enter with pure minds into the Holy of Holies”³⁴. As late as the fourteenth century, the chapel was still being referred to as *Sancta Sanctorum dicitur in palatio Lateranensi*;³⁵ and the ambivalence persisted into the eighteenth century in the title of the first monograph on the building.³⁶ The same formalizing of what seems to have belong as a casual allusion seems to apply as well to the wood box commissioned by Pope Leo III (798-816) inside the altar. John the Deacon also referred to it only as the *arca cipressina*”; but sometime later, perhaps because the four rings evoked the Ark of the Covenant, a label inscribed *Santa Sanctorum* was affixed to it³⁷. Cumulated popular experiences, not nomenclature, it would seem, determined the space’s appellation and that of an object within it³⁸. By extension, the appellations amplified the sanctity, which was made permanent when Pope Nicholas III (1277-80) built a new chapel on the site for the icon of Christ and treasury of relics³⁹ and later when the Counterreformation declared that *NON EST IN TOTO SANCTIOR ORBE LOCUS*⁴⁰.

³² VALENTINI, R., “Descriptio lateranensis ecclesia”, *Codice topografico*, 3 (1946), pp. 319-168, at pp. 356-358; VOGEL, C., “Le Descriptio Lateranensis du Diacre Jean”, in *Mélanges en l’honneur de Monseigneur Michel Andrieu*, Strasbourg, 1956, pp. 457-76. On the history of the arca cipressina, see THUNO, E., *Image and Relic. Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome*, Rome, 2002, pp. 160-171.

³³ ... ut eam in Palatium hoc subveheret, atque super Altare Sacrosanctae Basilicae B. Laurentii, quae ad Sancta Sanctorum, honorifice collocaret. Nam ut intra Sancta Sanctorum soli Summo Pontifici licebat olim intrare ... Videtur autem et hoc Ecclesiae Sanctuarium in eo excellere Sanctuarium Synagogae, quia majestas Domini, quae illic quandoque apparebat in nube, hic continue permanet in Imagine ... Et ut apertius clareat quam terribilis est locus iste, et quod vere domus Dei sit, et Aula Sancta, quid ibi quodam tempore acciderit, audiat. WOLF, G., *Salus Populi Romani. Die Geschichte römischer Kultbilder im Mittelalter*, Weinheim, 1990, p. 323.

³⁴ See NUSSBAUM, O., “Sancta Sanctorum”, *Römische Quartalschrift*, 54 (1959), pp. 234-246.

³⁵ Muratori, L., *Rerum Italicarum scriptores*, Milan, 1725, p. 643.

³⁶ MARANGONI, G., *Istoria dell’antichissimo oratorio o capella di San Lorenzo nel Lateranense, comunemente appellato “Sancta Sanctorum”, e della celebre immagine del SS. Salvatore detta acheropita*, Rome, 1747.

³⁷ See NUSSBAUM, “Sancta Sanctorum”; BAUER, F. A., *Das Bild der Stadt Rom im Frühmittelalter. Papststiftungen im Spiegel des Liber Pontificalis von Gregor dem Dritten bis zu Leo dem Dritten*, Wiesbaden, 2004, pp. 75-80; Thuno connects Paschal I’s letter to Leo V to the cypress box and makes a cogent argument that the chest may already have been identified with the Old Testament Ark already in the ninth century, THUNO, *Image and Relic*, pp. 166-71; see also SMITH, J., “Care of Relics in Early Medieval Rome”, in *Rome and Religion in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. X. Noble*, Farnham, 2014, pp. 179-205.

³⁸ Nussbaum, “Sancta Sanctorum”.

³⁹ *Sancta Sanctorum* (Milan, 1995); HERKLOTZ, I., “Die Fresken von Sancta Sanctorum nach der Restaurierung. Überlegungen zum Ursprung der Trecentomalerei” in *Pratum Romanum*, COLLELA, R. L. et alii (eds.), Wiesbaden, 1997, pp. 149-180.

⁴⁰ CEMPANARI, M., *Sancta Sanctorum Lateranense*, Rome, 2003, pp. 208-219.

Even after the medieval structure was preserved within Domenico Fontana's building⁴¹, the interior remained visible only through a grid at the top of the Scala Santa, permitting the Christian faithful, after experiencing something of Jesus' suffering in their own persons (unlike the Israelites in the San Paolo Bible) at least to peer into the Holy of Holies and glimpse the icon on the altar. A few privileged historians, among them Onofrio Panvinio in the sixteenth century and Giovanni Marangoni in the eighteenth, were allowed to enter and to publish what was readily visible⁴². In 1894, the great Jesuit historian, Hartmann Grisar was permitted to photograph the interior but was made to wait a full decade before he gained access to the relics that truly sanctified the *Sancta Sanctorum* and to study them⁴³. In 1905, the locked recesses were opened and the safe beneath the altar, secured by double doors, emptied. The contents were put on display almost immediately (until recently in galleries controlled by the Biblioteca Apostolica) but it took most of the century before the box itself was made accessible; in the mid-1980s, the *Sancta Sanctorum* was deconsecrated, restored, and ultimately opened to the public. I vividly remember clambering up scaffolds in 1989 and glimpsing eye to eye the painting of Pope Nicolas III accompanied by St. Paul, delivering the precious container he had commissioned into St. Peter's hands who, in turn, conveys it to the enthroned Christ. Between the dedication picture and the grated niches containing relics of the thirteen pieces of bread from the Last Supper and the stone from Christ's tomb, sixteenth-century frescoes effect the transition to the altar below. At the right, an angel bearing a lance figures two of the relics and another shows Pope Stephen VI bringing the bones of Sts. Marianus and Diodorus into the chapel in an open box⁴⁴.

The Christ in the thirteenth-century *Sancta Sanctorum* fresco alludes, of course, to the precious seventh-century icon on the altar below that John the Deacon and Nicholas Manicutius both feature. Known from the eighth century, at least, as the *acheropsita*, i.e. *acheiropoieton*, it, too, may have been intended as a replacement of the Old Testament sanctuary "made by hand;" but John the Deacon gave a different account of the name, citing a legend that the Evangelist Luke had sketched the figure and an angel had finished it⁴⁵; and Maniacutius added that the Evangelist made the image *non operibus manuum carnalium sed domini iussu* at the moment Christ ascended to heaven so that generations of the faithful would know his beauty. Carried through Rome on the evening of Ferragosto, the acheropita sanctified the *urbs beata Hierusalem* as the Ark of the Covenant once had; but like the fearsome Ark of the Covenant that smote Uzzah when he touched it (2 Sam. 6.7), the Acheropita was deemed dangerous to look at. Gervaise of Tilbury reported that Pope Alexander III (1159-81) had had it covered by a silk cloth "because it caused such violent trembling in people who gazed at it too intently that

⁴¹ DONADONO, L., *La Scala Santa a San Giovanni in Laterano*, Rome, 2000.

⁴² PANVINIO, O., *Le sette chiese principali de Roma*, Rome, 1570; MARANGONI, *Istoria*.

⁴³ *Die römische Kapelle Sancta Sanctorum und ihr Schatz*, Freiburg im Br., 1908.

⁴⁴ See TOSINI, P., "La loggia dei santi del Sancta Sanctorum: un episodio di pittura sistina", in *Sancta Sanctorum*, pp. 202-223.

⁴⁵ WOLF, *Salus populi Romanæ*; ROMANO, S. et al., "L'acheropita del Salvatore", in *Il volto di Cristo* (cat. of an exhib.), Milan, 2000, pp. 39-63; see also, BELTING, H., *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Age of Art*; JEPHCOTT, E. (trans.), Chicago, 1994, pp. 331-314 et passim.

there was a risk of death”⁴⁶. Enclosed in an elaborate silver reliquary, it is now badly damaged; but numerous copies, including an early thirteenth-century version from Trevignano (Rome, Museo nazionale dell’art antica; Fig. 13)⁴⁷, provide a general impression of what the original Christ Emmanuel seated on a gemmed throne looked like.⁴⁸

John the Deacon also records that, in his day, fragments from the Holy Land were arranged “sub pedibus” the Acheropita⁴⁹, that is, those in a sixth/seventh-century wood box (Vatican, Museo; Figs. 14-16)⁵⁰. Indeed, drops of candle wax on the lid are evidence that, at some point at least, the reliquary was positioned atop an altar⁵¹. When the arrangement of icon and stones was first contrived for the St. Lawrence chapel is unknown; but it would seem to go back before the eleventh century. The *Liber*



Fig. 13. Christ in Majesty, 13th c., Rome, Museo nazionale dell’art antica

Pontificalis reports that when Pope Stephen II (752-57) left the Patriarchium “on a certain day with great humility he held a procession and lityny in the usual way with the holy image of

⁴⁶ Writing in 1215: *Papa Alexander tertius multiplici panno Serico operuit, eos quod attentius intuentibus tremorem cum mortis periculo inferret*; Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia, Recreation for an Emperor*, BANKS, S. E. and BINNS, J. W. (eds. and trans.), Oxford, 2002, pp. 606-607.

⁴⁷ GARRISON, E. B., “The Christ Enthroned at Casape with Notes on the Earlier Roman Redeemer Panels”, in *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Italian Painting*, II (1955), pp. 5-20; LEONE, G., *Icone di Roma e del Lazio*, Rome, 2012, vol. 1, pp. 75-76; vol. 2, pp. 78-79.

⁴⁸ See the discussion by ZCHOMELIDSE, N., “The Aura of the Numinous and Its Reproduction: Medieval Paintings of the Savior in Rome and Latium”, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 55 (2010), pp. 219-256.

⁴⁹ *Et super hoc altare est imago Salvatoris mirabiliter depicta in quadam tabula, quam Lucas evangelista designavit, sed virtus Domini angelico perfecit officio; sub cuius pedibus, in quadam pretiosorum lapidum linea pignora huius sanctuarii sunt recondite*; *Descriptio*, p. 357. ZCHOMELIDSE, “Aura”, pp. 248-49.

⁵⁰ See CORNINI, G., “‘Non Est in Toto Sanctior Orbe Locus.’ Collecting Relics in Early Medieval Rome”, in *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, BAGNOLI, M. et al. (eds.), New Haven and London, 2010, pp. 69-78 (also entry on p. 36); KRUEGER, D., *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium*, Philadelphia, 2014, pp. 66-105 and ID., “Liturgical Time and Holy Land Reliquaries in Early Byzantium”, in *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, KLEIN, H. and HAHN, C. (eds.), Washington, DC (forthcoming). I thank Derek Krueger for making this important article available to me.

⁵¹ Wax drops are preserved also on the eleventh-century wood reliquary box from Sant Martí de Tost (Vic, Museu Episcopal), not only on the cover but also on the upper surfaces of the compartments inside. I wish to thank Marc Sureda I Jubany, the curator, for allowing me to examine the box and Francesc Tornero, the restorer, for discussing the evidence these vestiges provide for use.



Fig. 14. Reliquary, outer surface of lid, 7th c., Rome, Museo Vaticano



Fig. 15. Reliquary, inner surface of lid, 7th c., Rome, Museo Vaticano

our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ called the *acheiropieta*, and along with it he brought forth various other sacred religious objects”⁵². The *sacra mysteria* were most likely reliquaries, which in the eighth century, would almost certainly have included this box. In fact, the reliquary’s roundover and rabbitted edges invite picking up; and the careful carpentry recalls a flat-bottomed boat (as on the Trier sarcophagus) intended to transport precious cargo. The lid, it should be noted, was fitted onto the box and equipped with a crescent notch for sliding it off; the fact that it is not held in place by a groove or attached hinges or clasps would not preclude its being carried in covered hands, as a cleric does in the scene of the Translation in San Clemente⁵³ or as Pope Stephen VI is shown in the sixteenth-century fresco in the *Sancta Sanctorum* itself. The outer surface is painted in encaustic, moreover, a medium that Pliny reports was valued for its durability and hence used for the outside of ships⁵⁴. Like the Acheiropita, the lid shows signs of wear, albeit not as much.

⁵² *In una vero dierum cum multa humilitate solite procedens in letania cum sacratissima imagine domini Dei et salvatoris nostri Iesu Christi quae acheropsita nuncupatur, simulque et cum ea alia diversa sacra mysteria eiciens, Le Liber Pontificalis, Texte, introduction et commentaire*, DUCHESNE, L. (ed.), Paris, 1886, vol. I, p. 442; trans. DAVIS, R., *The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes* (Liber Pontificalis), Liverpool, 1992, p. 57.

⁵³ See ROMANO, S., *Riforma e tradizione*, Milan, 2006, pp. 135-137. The possibility that the reliquary box once was protected by an outer box is not, in my opinion, out of the question.

⁵⁴ *Encausto pingendi . . . quae pictura navibus nec sole nec sale ventisque corrumpitur, Historia naturalis*, Bk. XXXV, chap. 41.

Transportability and also the therapeutic nature of its contents are signaled by the type of box itself. In antiquity, doctors carried instruments and medicines in containers with sliding lids like this one. A small example suitable only for medicines dating to ca. 400, decorated with Asclepius to indicate its purpose, was discovered in 1943 beneath the cathedral altar at Chur where, with suitable utility and symbolism, it had been appropriated for relics, wrapped in silk and hidden within the altar⁵⁵; and a later example with Hygiea, the goddess of healing, carved on its lid is preserved in Washington (Dumbarton Oaks)⁵⁶. Another box closely related to the Chur example, from the *Sancta Sanctorum* itself, represents Christ, not Aesclepius, as the healer⁵⁷; the Savior cures the man born blind.

How precisely the box was arranged beneath the icon is not known; but the Trevisano copy attests to the fact that, by the thirteenth century, the positioning was firmly cemented. The prominent semi-circular inventory painted *sub pedibus* this Savior lists numerous relics, many of them, such as pieces of the *lignum crucis* and *lapide sepulcri* also in the *Sancta Sanctorum*, as well as physical mementoes of Roman saints Lawrence, John the Baptist, Primus, Felicianus, Anastasius, and Nereo and Achilleus⁵⁸. The Acheropita's Luke legend suggests that the arrangement of earth below and Christ above may have been inspired by a representation of the Ascension, as on Holy Land ampullae and inside the *Sancta Sanctorum* box, which pictured Mary watching and the apostles recoiling in astonishment and sorrow as the enthroned Christ borne up by four angels rises to heaven. In a fresco Pope Leo IV (847-55) introduced into the Lower Church of San Clemente (Fig. 17)⁵⁹, moreover, the world Christ leaves is activated by an inserted relic, presumably a stone from the Mount of Olives, or perhaps more than one given its size, the others possibly related to the scenes on the adjacent wall: the Crucifixion, Maries at the Tomb, Anastasis, and



Fig. 16. Reliquary, box, 7th c., Rome, Museo Vaticano

⁵⁵ VOLBACH, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, pp. 64-65.

⁵⁶ VOLBACH, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, p. 65; WEITZMANN, K., *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, Vol. 3 Ivories and Steatites, Washington, D.C., 1972, p. 22.

⁵⁷ GRISAR, *Sancta Sanctorum*, p. 121; Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 92.

⁵⁸ LEONE, *Icone*, vol. 2, pp. 78-79.

⁵⁹ OSBORNE, J., "Early Medieval Wall-Paintings in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome" (Ph.D. dissertation) London, 1979; TRONZO, W., "Setting and Structure in Two Roman Wall Decorations of the Early Middle Ages", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41 (1987), pp. 477-92; GUIDOBALDI, F., *San Clemente. Gli edifici romani, la basilica paleocristiana, e le fasi altomedievali*, Rome, 1992, pp. 205-208.

Marriage at Cana, several of these events were also marked by relics in the *Sancta Sanctorum* box that John the Deacon identifies: *lapis de monte Oliveti . . . sancta petra in qua sedit Angelus ad sepulchrum, and lignum Crucis Domini*. The fresco may, perhaps, had been inspired by the pope's St. Lawrence chapel just around the corner from it. As William Tronzo has pointed out, moreover, the twelfth-century apse fresco in San Pietro in Tuscania, just north of Rome, also depicts Christ's Ascension above a receptacle for relics⁶⁰. In other words, the arrangement of the two principal treasures in the *Sancta Sanctorum* imitated an established composition derived from Holy Land mementoes, which comprehended the experience from the altar to a box containing relics, to a narrative of Christ's life, and ultimately to Christ in heaven. It is noteworthy that the Bobbio ampullae were, themselves, discovered within a wood box inside the altar with relics of saints⁶¹.

Also familiar from the Holy Land *ampullae*, the imagery that adorns the box's outside sets up expectations about the contents, an enormous cross, staked to a mound of dirt and enclosed in a blue mandorla with white beams of light emanating from its center, framed by Christ's enigmatic names at the top and the alpha and omega at the bottom. If I am right about the box's performative aspect, the lid would have been the only experience of those not privileged to look inside; indeed, the signs of Christ's life, death, and resurrection would have invested the closed reliquary with a talismanic power when it was the box was carried or displayed. The outer surface has largely escaped scholarly attention, however. Grisar included a small blurry photograph of it in his 1908 book, which has until very recently has remained the sole source used by the few other scholars that have mentioned the lid at all—including the most important recent commentators, Gabriele Mietke⁶² and Bruno Reudenbach (with inevitable problems)⁶³. The ignoring of the outer image is due, in part, to the fact that the lid's inner surface, picturing scenes from Christ's life, is displayed in the Vatican Museum as a kind of altarpiece, with the narratives propped up behind the box, despite the fact that no physical evidence indicates that the removed cover was ever attached to the container. The lid may simply have been set alongside the opened box, sometimes with one side up, perhaps, and at other times the other. Conventions of later art and museum paradigms have done what time itself failed to do, dismembering, reframing, and dislocating what in the Middle Ages was experienced first and foremost as a sacred container.

In some ways, the closest parallel is found on the outer surface of an icon of Elijah on Mount Sinai (Monastery of St. Catherine)⁶⁴, which pictures a cross intersected by light beams

⁶⁰ TRONZO, "Setting", p. 489.

⁶¹ CELI, G., "Cimeli Bobbiesi", *Civiltà Cattolica*, 74 (1923), 2, pp. 504-514, 3, pp. 37-45, 124-136, 355-344, 423-439; GRABAR, *Ampoules*; ELSNER, J., "Replicating Palestine and Reversing the Reformation. Pilgrimage and Collecting at Bobbio, Monza and Walsingham", *Journal of the History of Collections*, 9 (1997), pp. 117-30.

⁶² MIETKE, G., "Wundertätige Pilgerandenken, Reliquien und ihr Bildschmuck", in *Byzanz. Die Macht der Bilder*, Hildesheim, 1998, pp. 40-55.

⁶³ REUDENBACH, B., "Reliquien von Orten. Ein frühchristliches Reliquiart als Gedächtnisort", in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, Reudenbach, B. and Toussaint, G. (eds.), Berlin, 2005, pp. 21-41; ID., "Loca sancta. Zur materiellen Übertragung der heiligen Stätten", in *Jerusalem, du Schöne: Vorstellungen und Bilder einer heiligen Stadt*, Bern, 2008, pp. 9-32. Krueger reproduces the entire reliquary as it would have appeared with the lid atop; "Liturgical Time," fig. 6.1.

⁶⁴ See WEITZMANN, K., *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. The Icons*, Princeton, 1976, Vol. I, pp. 42-43.



Fig. 17. Ascension, 9th c.,
Rome, San Clemente

enclosed within a blue mandorla. There the cross is a *crux gemmata*, however, as it is as well on a sixth-century painting recently unearthed in a granary at Caesaria, which lacks the mandorla but includes the epithets and A and Ω in the same arrangement and with similar palaeography⁶⁵. On the box, the cross is rendered as a gnarled tree trunk highlighted on the left and shaded on the right, its crossbeam and *titulus* distinguished from the support by being depicted as fully finished wood boards. The rendering brings it closer to the *ampullae*, including the reverse of the Monza flask with the Ascension and another in Stuttgart (Württembergische Landesmuseum)⁶⁶ which, in an arrangement recalling the box's position on the *Sancta Sanctorum* altar, depicts Christ's tomb at the bottom and his image at the top, connected by the cross identified as the "tree of life"; inscribed ΕΛΑ(Ι)ΟΝ Ξ(ΥΛΟΝ Ζ)ΩΗΣ, the ampullae leave no doubt that they were receptacles for oil collected at Golgotha at the shrine of the cross which was believed to have been made of wood from the tree God had planted at the center of Eden⁶⁷. The contrast of rough vertical trunk and planed cross-beam and titulus on the painting may have been meant to suggest the transformation of originary tree of salvation into the instrument of Christ's Passion made from it, or to evoke the dual nature through a contrast of natural and crafted in the same way the oval mandorla does by forming an intermediary grey

⁶⁵ *Cradle of Christianity*, ISRAELI, Y. and MEVORAH, D., Jerusalem, 2000, p. 34. The outside of a badly abraded seventh-century icon of St. Damian on Sinai is inscribed with XC and omega (in a similar form) above and below a (simpler) cross; the likelihood that the lost counterpart wing pictured Damian's twin brother Cosmas reinforces the iconography therapeutic underpinning.

⁶⁶ KÖTZSCHE-BREITENBRUCH, L., "Pilgerandenken aus dem Heiligen Land", in *Vivarium, Festschrift für Theodor Klauser*, Münster, 1984, pp. 229-246.

⁶⁷ IACOBINI, A., "L'albero della vita nell'immaginario medievale: Bisanzio e l'Occidente", in *L'architettura medievale in Sicilia: la cattedrale di Palermo*, Rome, 1994, pp. 241-290. The forms of the trees on the ampullae differ from that on the lid and they lack *tituli*.

filed at the intersection with the hillock, recalling another *ampulla*. The perfect emblem of the pilgrim's journey to the Holy Land in search of salvation, the cross within the mandorla also conjures up a sail, as the *ampulla's* verse suggests: (+ [ΕΛ]Α([Ι]ΟΝ Ξ[ΥΛΟΝ Ζ]ΩΗΣ [Ο]ΔΗΓΟ ΕΝ Ξ[ΙΡ]Α ΚΑΙ ΘΑ[Λ]ΑΣΣΗ, "oil of the wood of the tree of life which guides on earth and on sea."

When the lid is removed by hooking a finger on the crescent-shaped cut, a more mundane experience unfolds, but one still imbued with sanctity. Five scenes painted in tempera highlighted in gold track Christ's life on earth from his birth to his return to heaven. These, too, have been connected to the pilgrims' flasks ever since Grisar compared the representation of the Holy Sepulcher to that on one of the *ampullae*; and they have been the subject of considerable art-historical interest because comparisons with the Rabbula Gospels confirm reinforce the box's late sixth-century dating and Palestinian origin and because, as Weitzmann demonstrated in a classic 1974 study and Gary Vikan has elaborated, the narratives are set in buildings constructed to memorialize the events and the rituals enacted at the sacred sites⁶⁸. They, thus, realize Maurice Halbwachs' claim that the actual events and material places in the Holy Land were, from the very beginning, set into a reciprocal relationship with believers' collective memory⁶⁹.

Reudenbach has pointed out that the scenes are arranged hierarchically, beginning with the Nativity in the lower left and culminating with the Ascension at the upper right, with emphasis through size and centrality on the Crucifixion⁷⁰; and Alexander Nagel has interpreted the visual ascent as an allegory of pilgrimage⁷¹. The two narratives focused on Christ's birth, death, and Resurrection, moreover, appropriately deploy nested containers to animate the hierarchy of sanctity. Situated in a cave designated by the star of Bethlehem, the Nativity features Christ atop a box-like manger, the opening in which evokes the cult of brandea, cloths that enabled pilgrims to breach the sacred shrines but not touch them directly. Echoing the cave's roof, the dome of the Holy Sepulcher in the other, shelters the shrine over Christ's tomb, enclosed by lattice barriers, its (empty) box here closed off from view. They are, in these ways, synecdoches of the reliquary itself.

The box includes not only pictures of Christ's earthly sojourn but also physical samples of it. What Reudenbach calls "Ortsreliquien," these were identified by authentics written directly on the collected fragments; of which four are still legible: "from Mount Sion," "from the Mount of Olives" (where, traditionally, the Ascension was believed to have taken place), "from Bethlehem," and at the center, from the "life-giving place (ΖΩΟΠΟΙΟΥ) of the Resurrection" (i.e. Christ's tomb).⁷² John the Deacon's inventory identified others, apparently from authen-

⁶⁸ WEITZMANN, K., "Loca Sancta and the Representational Arts of Palestine", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 28 (1974), pp. 31-55; VIKAN, G., *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, rev. ed. Washington, DC., 2010; on the relationship to liturgy, see now KRUEGER, "Liturgical Time."

⁶⁹ HALBWACHS, M., *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1971; TRUC, G., "Memory of Places and Places of Memory: For a Halbwachsian Socio-ethnography of Collective Memory", *International Social Science Journal*, 62 (2012), pp. 147-159.

⁷⁰ REUDENBACH, "Reliquien", p. 35.

⁷¹ *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time*, London, 2012. See also the forthcoming article, FRICKE, B., "Tales from Stones", *West 86th—A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*; I am grateful to Prof. Fricke for allowing me to read this analysis before publication.

⁷² Cf. GALLAND, B., *Les authentiques de reliques du Sancta Sanctorum*, Vatican City, 2004.

tics that, in the eleventh century, were still legible: a piece from the cross, the rock where the angel sat at Christ's tomb, the place where Mary was sitting when the angel approached her, stones from the Jordan, Gethsemane, the column of flagellation, the lance, Pilate's judgment throne, the rock from which water flowed in the desert, the mountain of the Transfiguration, Sinai where Moses received the Commandments, and Mary's tomb. By specifying the events that took place at the various places, John the Deacon's list sometimes goes further than the terse identifications of Holy Land sites on the pieces themselves, e.g. *lapis de monte Oliveti, ubi Dominus oravit ad Patrem*⁷³. In so doing, it represents a medieval shift governed by the kind of memorial cognition that Halbwachs studied in the development of the Holy Land shrines, which were built on the sites identifiable only through Scripture and legend. Before Jerusalem was lost in the seventh century, the gathered stones and pieces of wood tethered the here-and-now to the mythic places; by the eleventh century, they also conjured up the rich albeit imagined experience of those places, for instance, Golgotha which, in the Middle Ages, was believed to be where Solomon's Temple had stood and where Pilate judged Christ⁷⁴. And, later, the experiences that transpired in each was noted, as Hrabanus Maurus explained, because Gethsemane was at the foot of Olivet, it evokes the humility Christ showed on behalf of humankind when he cried in the garden and prompts us to ascend the mountain of heavenly benefit⁷⁵. And by the twelfth century, those had been destroyed or, largely, inaccessible, so the originary events rather than the places had also to be evoked. The blending of places and times is also a characteristic of this pilgrim's treasure, encompassing not only Christ's life but also Old Testament theophanies and engendering a superfluity of holiness that provides abundant and unceasing power for those allowed to see and touch the samples from the places that Christ (and some others) saw and touched.

That experience was particularly vibrant in what John the Deacon listed as *sancta silex ubi Dominus conditus est*. What, precisely, this "matter in which Christ's body was laid" puzzled even Marangoni, who simply omitted it from his translation of the eleventh-century inventory. The most common translation would be a hard stone⁷⁶; but the list uses *lapis* or *legno* for the other relics; it also includes a *sancta petra in qua sedit Angelus ad sepulchrum* and another *de sepulchro Domini, ubi corpore mortuus requievit*. *Silex* would seem to be different, namely the gravely dirt itself with which Christ's tomb was filled⁷⁷, that the sixth-century pilgrim, Antonius Piacentius, reports had continuously to be replenished so that, like oil in the ampullae, "those who go in [to the tomb] take some as a blessing,"⁷⁸ and that, a cen-

⁷³ VALENTINI, "Descriptio," p. 357.

⁷⁴ SCHEIN, S., "Between Mount Moriah and the Holy Sepulchre: The Changing Traditions of the Temple Mount in the Central Middle Ages", *Traditio*, 40 (1984), pp. 175-195.

⁷⁵ *Expositio in Matthaem*, Bk. VIII, chap. 26; CCCM, vol. 174A (Turnhout, 2010), p. 700.

⁷⁶ In the meaning Gregory of Tours used in his *Glory of the Confessors* 51, namely, a burial ground as hard as stone. This is the usage deployed by Alberti.

⁷⁷ For the philosophical and theological underpinnings, see: TSUJI, S., "The Holy in the Dust: A Japanese View of Christendom's Cult of the Non-Representational," in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Papers from "Verbal and Pictorial Representations of the Invisible 400 to 1000" (Utrecht, 11-13 December 2003)*, DE NIE, G., MORRISON, K. and MOSTERT, M. (eds.), Turnhout, 2005, pp. 185-209.

⁷⁸ *Itineraria et alia geographica*, GEYER, P. and CUNTZ, O. (eds.) (CCSL 175), pp. 175-176.

tury later, had to be surrounded by circular barriers (as represented by the concentric rings in Adomnán's diagram) to keep pilgrims from depleting it. Indeed, the dirt's grey-yellow color is like that of Holy Land eulogiae made of dust collected at the sacred sites, such as those found in Beth Shean including one depicting the Ascension⁷⁹. These, as L. Y. Rahmani has noted, were shaved along the edges, presumably for medicinal purposes. Nagel has discussed the importance of dirt from Golgotha and the Holy Sepulcher in relation to St. Helena's legendary transporting of it to Sta. Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome⁸⁰. The sacred gravel is also figured on a mid-twelfth-century portable altar in Agrigento⁸¹, where –framed by the evangelist symbols and surrounded by the kings of Israel and their successor Peter and Paul, the two Intercessors, and the Ascension– it symbolizes Christ's physical absence, forming a marble platform for the Eucharistic body⁸². It was realized, as well, in the fenestration at Karlstejn.

In the *Sancta Sanctorum* box, the "sancta silex" forms a field of cognition of the other relics; as Reudenbach first noticed, the fragments of stone and wood embedded in it are not a random assemblage but form a cross intersected by a *chi* as on the outer lid⁸³. Engaging contemporary mosaic techniques⁸⁴, the relics collected in the Holy Land thus establish a labile relationship between figure and ground that, as also later in the San Paolo Bible and Valenciennes Apocalypse, only a diligent viewer discerns⁸⁵. In the first instance, this would have been the pope, who, having kissed the altar and intoned the *Aufer a nobis*, would presumably have removed the box from under the Acheropita, held it, looked at it, slid the lid off, and gazed at the contents. At that point, he would have recapitulated Helena's identifying Christ's cross within

⁷⁹ RACHMANI, L. Y., "Eulogia Tokens from Byzantine Bet Sh'an", *Atiqot*, XXII (1993), pp. 109-119. *Cradle of Christianity*, p. 212; PENTCHEVA, B., *The Sensual Icon. Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park, PA, 2010, pp. 17-44; O'CONNOR, L., "Christ in Majesty on a Late Antique eulogia token in the British Museum", *Convivium*, 1-2 (2014), pp. 74-87.

⁸⁰ NAGEL, *Medieval Modern*, pp. 100-114; VARAGNOLI, C., *S. Croce in Gerusalemme. La basilica restaurata e l'architettura del Settecento romano*, Rome, 1995.

⁸¹ GAUTIER, M.-M., *Émaux méridionaux*, Vol. 1, Paris, 1987, p. 57. PALAZZO, É., *L'espace rituel et le sacré dans le christianisme. La liturgie de l'autel portatif dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Age*, Turnhout, 2008, p. 166.

⁸² KARTSONIS, A., *Anastasis. The Making of an Image*, Princeton, 1986, pp. 186-203. Compare, for instance, the frontispiece in the Lavra Lectionary (Mt. Athos, Lavra Monastery, Skevophylakion, fol. 1v, Kartsonis, Fig. 80. The pebbly surface would, then, refer also to the tombs of all human beings, redeemed by Christ's own death.

⁸³ REUDENBACH, *Reliquien*, pp. 31-32. Krueger has cast doubt that the stones were arranged this way from the start ("Liturgical Time", p. 112, n. 3); still, he, too accepts the relationship: "such would have to have been the intention of the person who set the stones at a later date".

⁸⁴ The recently discovered sixth-century floor mosaic in a church at Aluma, for instance, offers a comparison in a gemmed cross flanked by alpha and omega; TALGAM, *Mosaics*, p. 182.

⁸⁵ This is, of course, precisely the effect of the San Paolo Bible and it is the theme, as well, of the famous Girona tapestry, where the cross that cures the Emperor Constantine is also vivid green and relates to Paradise. As Manuel Castiñeiras has argued, moreover, the great cloth may itself evoke the Temple curtain and the representation of the Finding of the True Cross makes one think that the occasion for which it was made may have been the launching of the First Crusade to recapture the Holy Land; *El tapís de la creació*, Girona, 2011; see also, BAERT, B., *The Heritage of Holy Wood. The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image*, Leiden, 2004; FROJMOVIC, E., "Translating Jerusalem: Jewish Authenticators of the Cross", in *Jerusalem as Narrative Space*, pp. 155-186; and MAGGIONI, G. P., "The Literary Sources for the *Legenda Aurea*", in *Agnolo Gaddi and the Cappella Maggiore in Santa Croce in Florence. Studies After Its Restoration*, ed. FROSININI, C., Cinisello Balsamo, 2014, pp. 123-35. The ninth-century purse reliquary of St. Stephen in Vienna (Schatzkammer) engages the same dynamic. It once contained earth

the soil of Golgotha, as pictured in the late ninth-century Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzenus (Paris, BnF, MS. gr. 510, fol. 440r; Fig. 18)⁸⁶. One version of the underlying legend reports that Judas Cyriacus, a Jewish descendent from an eye-witness of the Crucifixion, led the Empress to the place where Christ's cross was buried but could not differentiate it from the instruments of the thieves' deaths; only the community of believers was able to perceive its special, sacred nature. The pope recapitulated this moving from physical apprehension to spiritual recognition in an act of recirculation. When he closed the box and looked again at the cross flanked by the alpha and omega on the lid, he presumably comprehended the essential message expressed also in the *De inventione sanctae crucis* liturgy, which proclaims that the cross's radiance restores the tree of life and returns to Paradise those who apprehend it⁸⁷. The painting on the lid echoes the form discerned in the stones and the stones, in turn, resonate with the image on the lid when the box is again closed. The result is like that of Byzantine True Cross reliquaries studied by Holger Klein, but also different, it depends not only on viewing the relics but also, as in the San Paolo Bible and Valenciennes Apocalypse, on finding the hidden cross within, that is, of truly recapitulating Helena's story and the implied power the discovery effects.

Like Christ himself, the humble bones, stones, fragments of wood, cloth, and even dirt, the pope privileged to look at the box's interior was assured, were redolent with their very opposite, as Paulinus of Nola put it in the fifth century: "those bones of the saint's body are not choked with death, but endowed with the hidden seed of eternal life, so that from the tomb they breathe out the life-giving fragrance of his triumphant soul, by which efficacious healing is granted to the sick who pray for it" (Carmen 18)⁸⁸. The stones constitute an expanded field of material objects imbued with soteriological aura as Leontius of Neopolis explained in the seventh century: "If God does miracles by means of bones, it is quite clear that he is also able to do the same by means of icons, stones, and many other objects"⁸⁹. We do not need (or need to believe in) Jane Bennett's neo-animistic theory in which material things have inherent vitality to understand the power attributed in the Middle Ages to such vibrant matter⁹⁰.

soaked with the martyr's blood, animated on the outside by crosses formed of red garnets among the other stones set in gold; see BUETTNER, B., "From Bones to Stones-Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries," in *Reliquiare*, pp. 43-59.

⁸⁶ BRUBAKER, L., *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium. Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 163-169 et passim; BAERT, *Heritage*, pp. 84-86. On Helena and the cross cult, see: KLEIN, *Byzanz*, pp. 19-27 et passim and PENTCHEVA, B., "Containers of Power. Eunuchs and Reliquaries in Byzantium", *RES*, 51 (2007), pp. 109-120; Ead., *Icons of Power. The Mother of God in Byzantium*, University Park, PA, 2006, pp. 70-71; and Ead., "The Performance of Relics: Concealment and Desire in the Byzantine Staging of *Leipsana*," in ΣΥΜΜΕΙΚΤΑ (Collection of Papers Dedicated to the 40th Anniversary of the Institute for Art History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade), Belgrade, 2012, pp. 55-71.

⁸⁷ On the staging of opening Byzantine True Cross reliquaries and the relation to patriarchal liturgy, see: PENTCHEVA, "Performance of Relics," pp. 64-66.

⁸⁸ . . . ossaque sancti corporis a tumulo, non obsita puluere mortis, arcano aeternae sed praedita semine uitae, uiuificum spirant animae uicticis odorem, quo medicina potens datur exorantibus aegris; *S. Pontii Meropii Paulini Nolani Opera*, Hartel, W. (ed.) *CSEL XXX*, Vienna, 1894, pp. 105-06; trans. Walsh, P. G., *The Poems of St. Paulinus of Nola*, Ramsay NJ, 1975; p. 120; Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Εἰ δὲ δι' ὀστέρων φαρματουργεῖ ὁ θεός εὐδηλον ὅτι δύνανται καὶ δι' εἰκόνων καὶ λίθων καὶ ἑτέρων πολλῶν; THÖMMEL, H. G., *Frühgeschichte der ostkirchlichen Bilderlehre. Texte un Untersuchungen zur Zeit von dem Bilderstreit*, Berlin, 1992, p. 348; BRUBAKER, L., *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680-850). The Sources*, Aldershot, 2001, pp. 252-53.

⁹⁰ BENNETT, J., *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, 2010.



Fig. 18. Helena Finding True Cross, 9th c., Paris, BnF, Ms. gr. 510, fol. 440r

At Karlstejn, too, the collecting of base materials, the fixing with labels and images, the creating of narratives of looking, concealing, opening, and closing, blurred the distinctions between inert and dynamic, and between past and present. Withdrawing, after prayers, from the complex experience of tomb and heaven in the inner Chapel, Charles IV and his empress first confronted their own portraits in the guise of a new Constantine and Helena and then faced depictions of the end of time on the entry wall, reminding them that earthly power is transient, just as the Ark of the Testament was, and will cede to God's judgment.

The *Sancta Sanctorum* reliquary thus allows us to construct what we might call a "corporeal aesthetics" that is broadly applicable to medieval works. As they increasingly have been doing, art historians need to move beyond images, which may be more or less adequate for iconographic and stylistic research but which fail to recapture the experience of the sacred. This means that, wherever possible, they must see the objects themselves and touch, open and close, and even smell them. For the *Sancta Sanctorum* box, I needed the help of generally underappreciated curators and restorers, Guido Cornini and Angela Cerruti, and white gloves alongside the cameras and notebook in my pilgrim's kit. But by examining the uncanny object intently, holding it, and moving its parts I was able to extend to other senses what I have previously argued about vision, namely, that concerted, sustained perception was a means in the Middle Ages to move the devout viewer through temporal history, memory, and mental contemplation. Increasing the desire to breach holy spaces and, at the same time, moderating it, nested boxes constructed and controlled sacred experience in a way that is consistent with current neuro-anthropological ideas about cognition in which perceived things simultaneously both embody needs and determine them, what Lambros Malafouris has called an "archaeology of mind". The external presences elicit the urge to look inside which, denied to most of the faithful, reinforced the mystery. For the privileged elite allowed to open the containers,

the successive replacements sequenced the experience, moderating the anxiety and at the same time intensifying the desire for the Divine. Even Grisar succumbed to the effect when, after more than a decade's pleading with two popes, he was permitted, finally, to enter the Sancta Sanctorum, open the niches, and remove the reliquaries from the altar: "I can sum up my feelings of the first days after I saw the objects", he wrote, "in no other way than that I was emotionally stunned by what I saw"⁹¹. The sixteenth-century pentameter sums up that experience in words: *Non est in toto sanctior orbe locus*; the medieval objects incorporated and enacted it⁹².

Like the duplicative term *Sancta Sanctorum* itself and such other biblical superlatives as Song of Songs (Song of Songs 1.1), King of Kings (Ez. 7.12), and Lord of Lords Deut. 10.17), the *arca arcarum* intensified sacred experience and complicated it.⁹³ As versions of the succession of experiences in the Jewish tabernacle/temple, nested boxes reinforced the intensity of God's fearsomeness and, at the same time, replaced it with a wondrous effect that sublimated presence and desire into satisfaction with absence.

⁹¹ "Ich konnte am ersten Tage mein Gefühl in keinen andern Ausdruck zusammenfassen, als daß ich durch das Gesehene wie betäubt sie".

⁹² D'HAINAUT-ZVÉNY, B., "Quelques réflexions sur l'implication des paramètres spatio-temporels dans la constitution des *locis competentibus* des églises gothiques du nord", in *In Locis Competentibus*, DAUSSY, S. D. and REVEYRON, N. (ed.) (forthcoming).

⁹³ Derived from the Hebrew קִדְשֵׁי הַקִּדְשִׁים etc.; NUSSBAUM, "Sancta Sanctorum", p. 235.