

What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?

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Abstract

This article introduces prominent issues that surround the Christian use of reliquaries, first discussing examples from Trier made by the renowned Archbishop Egbert in the tenth century, then turning to early Christian texts to investigate the beginnings of relic practice and belief. Of special interest are the letters and poems of Paulinus of Nola, but also the commentaries of Augustine, Ambrose, Victricius of Rouen and others that flesh out an understanding of how reliquaries were essential to the project of creating an appropriate *reverentia* for relics (Peter Brown's term). The materiality of reliquaries, their creation of social relations, particular issues of enclosure and beauty, and questions of potential visibility are given special consideration.

Keywords

Relic, reliquary, Paulinus of Nola, Egbert of Trier, vision, audience

Relics and Reliquaries

Dramatically lit and displayed like a precious gem in its glass vitrine in the cool, secure vault of the treasury of the Limburg-an-der-Lahn Cathedral, a curiously phallic-shaped, hyper-attenuated object captures the viewer's attention but at the same moment confounds it (fig. 1). For the modern viewer, the object allows little or no insight into either its meaning or its controversial and dramatic past. One's first impression is of an entity, glittering, magnificent, static, and undeniably exotic. Over six feet long and covered with gold foil, what could be described as a floating spear, culminates at its apex in a small orb heavily ornamented with gems, pearls, enamels, filigree, and many, many inscriptions.



Figure 1. Limburg an der Lahn Cathedral Treasury. Reliquary of the Staff of Peter. Trier c. 980. Detail (Wikimedia).

The inscriptions — in Latin — introduce a series of demands that the object makes upon the spectator. They call upon viewers capable of reading (and close enough to piece together the long series of letters), to recognize the illustrious origin of the relic inside this reliquary, which itself was made in Trier. The first words, “*Baculum beati Petri*,” claim that this is the very “staff of Saint Peter,” reputed to have been used by an early bishop of Trier to resurrect a dead man. As a relic, therefore, it claims to be doubly sacred, invested with the indexical aura of having once touched the hands of Saint Peter, founder of the Western church, and proven already to be a conduit of miraculous power.

But even the illiterate, semi-literate, or relatively inattentive viewer is not likely to miss at least a portion of the message that this golden staff aggressively promotes. The enamels on the upper curve of the spherical knob represent the four evangelical beasts, the lower curve is encircled by a similarly worked series of enamels depicting, in the company of Peter himself, three early Trier bishops, each labeled, including Eucharius who was said to have accomplished the resurrection. A third and fourth row of six enamels represent the twelve Apostles, again with very legible labels. Down the long sides of the staff, paralleling equally long inscriptions, are the low relief portraits of twelve popes and twelve bishops of Trier, ending with the living archbishop and patron of the magnificent object, Egbert. Even if the viewer identifies only a few members of this impressive cast of characters, it is evident that the whole is a depiction of the hierarchy of the church and represents Trier's position as an apostolically founded archbishopric within a grand ecclesiastical "framework."

The actual framework is, of course, significant as well. The power of gold and gems is organized into a lattice that holds and doubles the meaning of the figural elements. Series of gems and pearls in fours, sixes and twelves are repeated among the network of precious stones that encloses the enamels. At the very top of the staff, a cross shape arrangement of emeralds lifted high on beautifully "architectural" settings suggests the eternal Cross ruling over the Heavenly Jerusalem, the holy city that is often symbolized by gems recalling its twelve gates.

Clearly, this reliquary is a magnificent and powerful enclosure and *representation* of a relic which supports the bishopric of Trier in its place in the Earthly Church and is capable of astounding miracles that connect it to the heavenly Church.

In the last sentence, the word "representation" is carefully chosen. What is the relic really? Did it indeed belong to Trier, and by what right? Why is it no longer in Trier, its proclaimed and vaunted home? Only further careful examination begins to open up these potentially troubling issues.

The long inscription itself reveals the first intimations of uncertainty. In tracing the provenance of the relic from Peter to Eucharius, first bishop of Trier, through a short residence in Metz to escape the "Huns" (Normans) and via Cologne finally back to Trier where it was

divided and a portion returned to Cologne, keeping the upper portion for Trier, the text not only drops names of saints, bishops, and emperors (Otto I and II), and thereby accumulates much prestige, but also repeatedly calls attention to “this church.” In its fulsome claims to prestige, does it cast doubt on its own accuracy; does it protest too much?¹

Indeed, as the historian Thomas Head has argued, the claims that the reliquary makes in this inscription, as well as in its entire presentation, are “brazen” fiction and represent the first time that a text records the claim that the staff had been given to Eucharis by Peter (Head 1997:68). Cologne also independently claimed a staff of Peter which, in fact, it never gave up to Trier. Ultimately, the desire to possess such a staff is a consequence of the fierce competition to claim the status of foremost archbishopric of the empire, and we find this object in the center of the controversy.

What is really inside the reliquary? Typical of reliquaries made in the western medieval world, this golden staff holds its relic tightly and invisibly, inaccessible to either devout or skeptical eyes. Nevertheless, its (somewhat exaggerated) staff-shaped form allows it to intimate a whole and undamaged relic, carefully protected from Huns and/or the ravages of time (a dubious assertion indeed). Furthermore, its long staff shape allowed it to be carried and to be prominently visible in processions — and it is known to have been carried by Egbert himself. Moreover, in these processions it would have shared star billing with another famous and striking reliquary made for Egbert that also

¹) *BACULUM BEATI PETRI QVONDAM PRO RESVSCITATIONE MATERNI AB IPSO TRANSMISSVM. ET A SCO EUCHARIO HUC DELATUM. DIV HAEC AECLESIA TENVIT. POSTEA HVNORUM UT FERTVR TEMPORIBVS METTIS CVM RELIQVIS HVIVS AECLESIAE THESAVRIS DEPORTATUS IBI VSQ. AD TEMPORA OTTONIS PISSIMI IMPERATORIS SENIORIS PERMANSIT. INDE A FRATRE EIVS BRVNONE ARCHIEPO ET ANNVENTE VENERABILI VVERINO COLONIAE ARCHIEPO. NE ET HAEC AECLESIA TANTO THESAVRO FRAVDARETVR. IN DVAS EST PARTES TRANSSECTVS. VNA SVPERIORI VIDELICET HVIC AECLESIAE REDDITA ET A EBURNEO IBIDEN RETENTA. ANNO DOMINICAE INCARNAT DCCCCLXXX INDI... (VIII) (Westermann-Angerhausen 1973:36).*

claimed an apostolic association, the presence of which would reinforce the staff's prestige (fig. 2).

The self-proclaimed "altar consecrated to Andrew" contains, according to further details of its inscription: the Nail of the Lord, the sandal of Andrew, the beard of Peter, and "other holy relics" (Westermann-Angerhausen 1973:22; also Westermann-Angerhausen 1987, 1990, 1999). Once more, Egbert who is named as patron, has made the association to apostolic origins, now to *both* Peter and Andrew. As Head notes, Egbert has chosen through this reliquary altar with its diverse contents to highlight Andrew, the apostolic patron of Constantinople. As a member of the Ottonian court, Egbert was no novice to the niceties of invoking Byzantine prestige and power. One of the many antique spolia (or re-used artworks) included on the altar is a Frankish fibula inset with a coin of the Byzantine emperor Justinian at its center, a further glorification by association of the Trier relics (and a claim to great age and authenticity).

Of course the Andrew altar, with its image of a disembodied foot, presents a spectacle even more astounding and strange than the staff reliquary. We must agree in this case with the text of Romans 10:15: "How beautiful are the feet of those [the Apostles] who bring good news of good things!" With this foot as frame for the sandal of the Apostle, Egbert is creating a striking, memorable and indeed beautiful image and perhaps also making a personal claim to the metaphor of mission and conversion implied by the sandal (travel), inherited by the bishop of an apostolically founded see (Westermann-Angerhausen 1987). Although we will not explore such "body part reliquaries" and their full range of meanings, it is already apparent how impressive and creative such reliquaries could be (Hahn 1997a; Reudenbach 2000, 2008).

Turning back to the staff reliquary, one wonders how much remains of the object manufactured in circa 980 in Egbert's acclaimed workshop. Years of being carried in processions of various kinds produced damage to its length and repairs are recorded to the gems and details of ornaments (Westermann-Angerhausen 1973:39–40). Like all such reliquaries, over 1,000 years old, to some extent, this beautiful object is a product of making and re-making. It would not adequately put forth its splendid testimony if its gems and gold were allowed to be



Figure 2. Trier Cathedral Treasury. Portable Altar of Saint Andrew. Trier c. 980 (Sacred Destinations).

battered and broken. In its long history of possession and repossession, it has landed outside its original home and now is in the Diocesan museum of Limburg an der Lahn.

A first introduction to early medieval reliquaries has begun here with two exemplary objects. Both, and in particular the staff, perfectly represent the issues that are key aspects of medieval reliquaries — the object is not aberrant but typical.

We have found that the reliquary works hard to “represent” the relic as powerful, holy and sacred, part of the larger institution of the Church, at times using biblical metaphor as part of the process of creating meaning. While at the same time the relic is thus made “fully visible” in its power and associations, it is also unquestionably hidden

from view. Obscured by a glittering container covered with gems (meaningful even in its very materials), it was given very specific value in an elaborate system of provenance and exchange, exchange through gift, theft or even invention. As an object of continuing power, the reliquary has been constantly revised, physically or contextually, and brought up to date, surviving even today as a token of prestige for the modern church. However, in contrast to its modern isolation in a case, lit and immobilized as an art object, it was created to be a dynamic part of the chorus of saints, in company with other relics and reliquaries, representing the Church and its saints and their powers. It has been used, throughout its history, as an object to be carried and manipulated, displayed and presented.

Before, however, exploring these themes further we must pause to define and clarify terms. First and foremost: What is a relic? What is a reliquary?

The simplest answer to the first question is that a relic is a physical object that is understood to carry the *virtus* of a saint or Christ, literally the virtue but more accurately the power of the holy person. It could be a bone or bones, some other portion of the body, or merely some object that has been sanctified by having come into contact with a sacred person. It is often necessary that it be identified by a tag or *authentic*.² Sometimes it is even a tertiary relic or *brandeum*, an object that has touched a relic and now also carries the transferred, one might almost say “contagious” *virtus*. Material from sites in the Holy Land — dust, oil or water — was collected avidly and called “blessings” or *eulogiae*; perhaps at first more appropriately defined as the stuff of holy souvenirs rather than as relics, it gradually assumed the more sacred status as the objects came to circulate in the medieval West (Vikan 1982).

Although relic veneration is not clearly established as a practice by the Church until the fourth century, the first evidence of Christian relic veneration involves the faithful of Smyrna who in the mid second century CE collected the bones of the martyr Polycarp in order to use them to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, calling them

²) Authentic is a modern word for these customary labels that are perhaps as old as the seventh century (Hermann-Mascard 1975:120–2).

“more dear than precious stones” (Hermann-Mascard 1975:23). In other words, relics are defined through the recognition by some audience of the presence of power that leads to a certain desirability. The power may be represented by miracles or simply be acknowledged by institutional affirmation. Most important is that without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth. An audience is essential. Its attention authenticates the relic.

Thus, it is apparent why reliquaries themselves are also essential. They are mentioned in the earliest texts concerning relics as a means of honoring and transporting the sacred substances of relics, but they also, from the beginning, carry messages about the significance, authenticity, and meaning of the relics. Even if such messages are carried only by the abstractions of the prestige of precious materials, reliquaries are in their essence a mediation between relics and audiences. As such, we will see that they teach meanings and prepare the audience for the proper reception and treatment of the holy objects, what Peter Brown calls *reverentia*, “an etiquette toward the supernatural” (Brown 1981:119).

Although it is not unusual for reliquaries themselves to become objects of veneration as a sort of slippage of the meaning between container and contained,³ ultimately we must understand these objects as profoundly utilitarian. In the modern sense they are not art works and surely not “art for art’s sake.” They are intended to elicit veneration and to honor the relic — but beauty is decidedly subservient to these primary needs. One exemplary consequence of such priorities is that reliquaries rarely have integrity as unique objects. They are only rarely “original” art works because they often closely adhere to precedents.⁴ Moreover, they are constantly remade — a renewal that is not just practical but significant: “All things renewed are pleasing to God; Christ is ever renewing all things, and ennobling them to enhance His light” (Walsh 1975:308).

With these words, Paulinus of Nola, circa 400, one of the very first writers to comment on reliquaries, concludes his comments on the

³) For this slippage, see Hahn 1997a; for examples see Dierkens 1999:224.

⁴) I think this is why art historians have been reluctant to attempt more inclusive discussions of reliquaries. Not until art history could feel comfortable with ritual and reception theories could these objects be seriously studied.

rebuilding of the architectural shrine of Saint Felix. His comments express the motivations of any cleric or patron who renews and refurbishes a sacred reliquary or shrine — or for that matter encloses an ancient relic in a new reliquary. His words deserve our close attention as a first and very early example of an understanding of how reliquaries work and why reliquaries are made.

Paulinus describes two processes in his approach to relics: “ennobling” relics by encasing them in order to create “enhanced light” and to appreciate their origin in Christ; and “renewing” older reliquaries and structures out of honor to their contents and their ultimate maker. Both share in the same intent. Paulinus makes it quite clear that a spiritual dynamic is set in motion in his work, a dynamic which seeks to recharge the power of the relic for its audience. In his description, the renewal of the buildings around the shrine can be compared to the cleansing of the soul of a sinner, preparing it for the Last Judgment:

A new look gleams on the outside of the walls while the antiquity is hidden, enclosed within. . . . They are simultaneously old and new — neither equally new nor equally old. They are the same yet not the same as they depict the shape of future and present blessings. . . . So it will be on the day when men are permitted to rise again with life renewed. Amongst those who rise, precedence will be given to the group whose flesh is covered with a shining garment. (Walsh 1975:301–2)

Renewal becomes a virtue of the soul and a natural and spiritual process that must not be ignored. Although the sacred core remains untouched, all around it has been refreshed, polished, and perfected. The connection of these sacred things to the resurrection and end of time is explicit — in Paulinus’s words and in his renewal is contained the promise of the future.

Paulinus even begins to explicate the very important and very common occurrence in reliquaries of *spolia* or reused elements, often gems. Paulinus explains that, although he left the original cult building alone: “It remains inset like a jewel amongst the buildings” (Walsh 1975:120). There is no embarrassment in this sort of retouching, and the core seems to be rightfully hidden, although it is not destroyed. Ultimately, perhaps the most telling aspect of Paulinus’ poem is his use of a bodily metaphor for the reliquary. Surprisingly, however, it is not the relic and its reliquary that is justified in terms of a previous living

body but the newly arisen body of the faithful soul that is given value in its transfiguration into a sort of reliquary: “flesh . . . covered with a shining garment.”

Such a metaphorical linking of body and soul, relic and shrine is not unusual in medieval commentary on relics but is a first and very early instance in which a patron expresses his actions as clearly spiritual rather than artistic. As we will see, later clerics, although perhaps not so high-minded, followed the same path — making and remaking reliquaries as part of their duty to the Church; as part of a spiritual project to lift the minds of the faithful.

We are thus engaged, it would seem, in the study of a sort of object that resists most of the categories of conventional art history. Their beauty is secondary, their originality suspect, and their meaning and contents often obscure. The dating of such composite objects is difficult, and documentation often scanty or incomplete. Many of the richest collections and most renowned objects have been destroyed in the French Revolution or Protestant upheavals. Perhaps most damning of all, the charges of being products of “superstition” and “pious ignorance” cling to them like a sticky ooze. To the modern mind, they are at best uncanny, at worst only the utilitarian instruments of misdirected piety. Nonetheless, undeniably, they hold a certain fascination.

As Patrick Geary has noted, however, “given the importance of saints . . . the articulated doctrine of the saints’ cult . . . is . . . remarkably small in theology and law” (Geary 1994:42). Early doctrine and discussion of relics occurs in a variety of sources. One primary source, because early and evocative, is a sermon written by Victricius Bishop of Rouen upon the occasion of his reception of a number of relic fragments from Ambrose of Milan, *De Laude sanctorum* (396 A.D.). It vividly fleshes out the contemporary cult of relics and relic devotion. Another rich source for our purposes are the poems and letters of Paulinus of Nola, encountered briefly above, celebrating his patron saint Felix and ardently describing his personal devotion to relics in poems and in letters. Augustine, Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours all discussed saints and relics in important ways. Only in treatises that criticize the excesses and errors of the cult of saints, however, e.g., those of Claudius of Turin in his 825 *Apologeticum atque rescriptum*, and Guibert of Nogent, in his *De pignoribus sanctorum* of the early

twelfth century, do we get away from devotional, narrative or liturgical contexts. Finally, at the turn of the twelfth century, Thiofridus of Echnach writes the only medieval treatise focused on the meaning of relics and specifically discusses reliquaries in his *Flores Epytaphii Sanctorum* (Ferrari 1996). Of course, many other saints' lives and miracle accounts also contribute to our understanding, but, in effect, it was practice not theology that determined the shape of the cult of relics.

This "shape" was formed by "acts, uses, and ritual in society" (Geary 1978:42), but also concerned the imaginative place of relics in medieval culture, a topic so beautifully sketched by Peter Brown in his *Cult of the Saints*. In considering both, I think it helpful to turn again to Paulinus of Nola who introduces us to many of the issues concerning the practice of the cult of relics including their acquisition, whether by gift or theft and their celebration in art.

Although the normal means of acquiring relics was through the reception of a gift, theft was an alternative as Geary explains:

Not only were theft and gift more basic forms of property circulation than trade in the early Middle Ages, but they enjoyed higher prestige. . . . In both situations [gift or theft], the relationship of relative honor and status was at stake, and the property that changed hands functioned symbolically to affirm or deny that relationship. [In contrast] Commerce suggests neutrality. (Geary 1978:199)

In his book, *Furta Sacra*, Geary discusses medieval justification of theft of the relics of saints based on the saint's "participation" in the act. That is, the saint was understood always to have the power to make his or her bones immobile. In choosing not to work a miracle to do so, the saint allows the theft, usually because he or she was dissatisfied by the celebration of cult at the original location of his or her burial. This is surely the radical opposite of neutral exchange that might be represented by commerce.

In discussing the translation of relics from one city to another at a somewhat earlier moment than most of Geary's examples, Paulinus of Nola gives a multivalent explanation of motivations and causes that include commerce. At first Paulinus almost seems to be casting the devotee as a merchant extracting payment for transport. He quickly shifts, however, to other justifications and culminates his commentary

with vivid metaphors of natural dispersal and multiplication that justify and even *insist* upon relic distribution.

Paulinus contends that those trusted with the transport or relics felt justified in taking a bit of the relics for their own use, a sort of relic theft:

The faithful and zealous escorts of the relics were afforded a chance at the prompting of faith to break off some keepsakes from the holy bones as their deserved reward, so that they could individually bear back home for their personal protection the reward for their service and the payment of their toil. (Walsh 1975:143)

This practice of dismembering or breaking the relic, far from being condemned, is cast as a natural act that envisions the relics as a sort of sustenance (Paulinus does at one point call Felix his “bread” [Walsh 1975:292]), and mimics the scattering of seeds by birds: “the sacred ashes have been scattered over different areas like life-giving seeds . . . the drops of ashes have begotten rivers of life.” Rather than an immoral act, the theft of relics thus becomes an act inspired by God, explicitly through the “prompting of faith.”

In a continuation of such metaphorical implications, rather than dead and quiescent remains, Paulinus and others describe relics as part of the still-living world and thus able to reproduce themselves. They are able to do this in terms of contact relics — oil, perfume or cloths that are allowed to touch the body and gain a measure of sanctity — but they also “reproduce” more immediately. They make gifts of themselves.

Paulinus tells of an occasion at the tomb of Felix when, “those who had bestowed the nard on the tomb prepared to draw it up to apply it to themselves, they found the vessels miraculously filled not with nard but with a heap of dust which burst out from below” (Walsh 1975:192). Rather than the dismaying picture this presents to the modern mind, this miracle was an occasion for joy, for the dust that “burst” forth constituted Felix’s authentic relics. Paulinus clarifies, “those bones of the saint’s body are not choked with the dust of death, but endowed with the hidden seed of eternal life” (Walsh 1975:120). Similarly Gregory of Tours tells us that St. Aredius, returning to his

Limoges abbey with a capsule about his neck with some dust from the grave of St. Martin, witnessed how the contents increased when placed in an oratory and squeezed out of the capsule.⁵

Of course, as above, relics were also exchanged as gifts and as gifts they become a purposeful enactment of ties of friendship and other affiliations. Paulinus received his precious relic of the cross as a gift from the Roman matron Melania and, in turn passed on a fragment to a friend Severus (Wharton 2006:19–20). Unlike earlier forms of Roman gift-giving, especially in the late Antique world, it is notable that women could be involved in the gift-giving and support of foundations that was essential to the cult of saints (Brown 1981:47). Because of such gift-giving, as Brown has noted, relics were not concentrated in a few holy locations such as Jerusalem or Rome but instead were spread throughout Christendom in the Late Antique world (as Paulinus poetically claimed like seeds). They “took on the shifting quality of late-Roman social relationships: distances between groups and persons were overcome by gestures of grace and favor” (Brown 1981:89).

As part of social relations, they also found their proper place. Rather than allow them to fall under the unregulated control of private persons and allow the possibility of scandal, from the earliest cult, with a few notable exceptions, relics were brought under the control of the Church. Their closest friends were the clergy (and perhaps royalty) and their behavior and the behavior of those in their company was subject to a strict etiquette — a set of customs and a notion of proper behavior (Brown 1981:33ff).

What were these relics that were subject to such lively exchange? What form did they take? As above, relics were often small, nearly unidentifiable fragments in the form of dust or bone or cloth. It was, again, their provenance or accompanying story that validated them. Sometimes as well, it was the company they kept — they came in association with collections of relics.

For example, when Paulinus sends Severus a bit of the relic of the true cross for his basilica at Primuliacum, he sent along a verse to be used as an inscription:

⁵) *Hist. Franc. Lib.* VIII c. 15. Cited by Snoek 1995:85.

The revered altar conceals a sacred union, for martyrs lie there with the holy cross. The entire martyrdom of the saving Christ is here assembled — cross, body, and blood of the Martyr, God himself. . . . where the cross is, there too, is the Martyr; for the Martyr's cross is the holy reason for the martyrdom of the saints. (Walsh 1975:151)

The linking of the saints to the sacrifice of Christ through the relic of the cross in “sacred union” is essential to the meaning of the relic. In describing the altar of his own church dedicated to Felix, Paulinus again describes an altar in similar fashion:

Under the lighted altar, a royal slab of purple marble covers the bones of holy men. Here God's grace sets before you the power of the apostles by the great pledges contained in this meagre dust. . . . One simple casket embraces here this holy band, and in its tiny bosom embraces names so great. (Walsh 1975:151)

In this case, rather than focus on sacrifice and martyrdom, Paulinus emphasizes the presence of the grace of the power of the “holy band” of the Apostles. Elsewhere he speaks of the way that a saint in the altar joins with Christ during the mass “when the chaste gift of Christ is devoutly offered there, the fragrance of his soul may be joined to the divine sacrifice” (Walsh 1975:151). A remarkable continuity preserves these ideas of the collective union of saints under the altar throughout the middle ages. Although the general reference is to Revelation 6:9 “souls under the altar,” the reference can also be much more specific. One is reminded of the “slab of purple marble,” porphyry, that protects the gatherings of saints in each of a series of portable altars from the central Middle Ages (Hahn in press).

Let us however, take these ideas one at a time, first considering the relic *in company* and then the relic as *fragment*.

The union or holy band of saints is none other, of course, than a representation of the Court of Heaven. As Victricius of Rouen remarked of his precious collection of relic fragments “So great a multitude of citizens of Heaven. . . so mysterious a unity of heavenly power” (Brown 1981:96). Even Einhard in about 830, praising the powers of Petrus and Marcellinus in a long account of their miracles, notes that saints work together “since those who are believed to have equal merit before God, are thought, and not absurdly [so], to work in common when performing miracles” (Einhard 1993:230–1).

In addition to cases, as above, where Paulinus imagined a company of saints in placing relics in his altar, we will find more often than not that surviving reliquaries contain more than one relic. Renowned reliquaries such as the twelfth-century *Arca Santa* in Oviedo with its Asturian relic cache (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1996:259–60), or Angilbert's reliquaries in early Carolingian Centula achieve their fame in part because of the astounding number of relics that were deposited in them. In a less well known example, in the ninth century, Hrabanus Maurus, abbot of Fulda created a reliquary with which he meant explicitly to imitate the Ark of the Covenant and deposited a multitude of relics in it, but unsatisfied, later added even more (Appleby 1995). Indeed, collecting relics becomes the role of the important ecclesiastics such as Einhard, as bishops and others are responsible for both the saintly foundation and the *ornamenta* of their churches. Similarly, kings and aristocrats have the well-being of their nations and families at interest.

The contemplation of the Court of Heaven seems to have been a meditation encouraged among the faithful, and one that lifted the devotee out of the cares of this world.⁶ One thing is clear, as residents of the Heavenly Jerusalem, saints had the ability to carry the prayers of the faithful before the Lord. As such “intercessors,” saints remain in heaven always ready to lend their help. Ambrose wrote about the elevation of Gervase and Protase in 386:

Our eyes were shut, so long as the bodies of the saints lay hidden. The Lord opened our eyes, and we saw the aids wherewith we have been often protected. We used not to see them, but yet we had them. And so, as though the Lord had said to us when trembling, “See what great martyrs I have given you,” so we with opened eyes behold the glory of the Lord, which is passed in the passion of the martyrs, and present in their working. We have escaped, brethren, no slight lead of shame; we had patrons and knew it not.⁷

⁶ The Frankish queen Radegund has an interesting history of collecting relics, recreating the court of Heaven as described in her *vitae*: Hahn 2006.

⁷ Ambrose Letter 22.11. Schaff & Wace 1896. The translation has been modernized by Thomas Head. The electronic version is available through the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*.

Intercession was an essential part of the importance of relics and allowed their functioning as part of social relations (Brown 1981: chap. 5). One imagines the saints and martyrs both as part of a lively and glittering court life, and as one's own lover or friend.

In contrast to such positive images of social cohesion, relic fragmentation presents a less welcome image. The notion of a fragment of a dismembered body can create a shudder of distaste or even horror in the modern observer. Nevertheless, Peter Brown vividly argues for the central importance of the fragment:

... it is precisely the detachment of the relic from its physical associations that summed up most convincingly the imaginative dialectic... For how better to suppress the fact of death, than to remove part of the dead from its original context in the all too cluttered grave? How better to symbolize the abolition of time in such dead, than to add to that an indeterminacy of space? Furthermore, how better to express the paradox of the linking of Heaven and Earth than by an effect of "inverted magnitudes," by which the object around which boundless associations cluster should be tiny and compact? (Brown 1981:78)

Indeed the literary theorist Susan Stewart also observes that the miniature can be particularly effective in its promise that it might "open itself to reveal a secret life — indeed to reveal a set of actions and hence a narrativity and history outside the given field of perception," and further that when one studies a tiny object, scientific studies document a "compressed time of interiority," a remarkable change in the experience of time (Stewart 1984:54, 66). Such observations precisely match Paulinus' experience of meditating on a relic of the True Cross in its tiny golden capsule, becoming lost in contemplation of the "invulnerable sign" (Walsh 1975:152–4).

Ultimately, one of the most important imaginary notions posited about saints is that, whether represented by whole bodies or fragments, they are fully present both in their relics and in heaven — a presence that allows them to act as messengers of prayers and requests — and because of this double presence relics have a marked liveliness. Seemingly quiescent saints could interrogate demons and the groans of the possessed testified to their living presence as Gregory of Tours writes: "In this way they bring home the presence of the saints of God to human minds, that there should be no doubt that the saints are

present at their tombs” (Brown 1981:109). Dead bodies of saints have pink complexions, relic fragments bleed, and saints even reach out of their tombs to work miracles! (Brown 1981:77). When it comes to the saintly, the categories of living and dead are so flexible that examples exist of relics appropriating bodies as living reliquaries, and living bodies serving as relics (Snoek 1995:29).

This last story once more comes from Paulinus and reveals a great deal about the early attitude toward relics as both *memoria*, and as indexical proof. The story is told in a letter that Paulinus writes to a Roman senator, Macarius. The letter accompanies and introduces a man, Valgius renamed Victor, that Paulinus is sending to the senator as a “spiritual gift,” a phrase that suggests that Valgius as a kind of relic was a treasure greater even than *eulogiae* from the Holy Land or Christ’s footprints in the soil of the Holy Land. As Paulinus conceives it, the reason for Victor’s relic-like status is that, after being abandoned by his ship’s crew at sea during a horrendous storm, the lowly sailor had visions in which Christ and angels spoke to him, renamed him Victor, instructed him how to care for the ship as well as when to sleep and eat, and even once tweaked his ear to awaken him. Paulinus is very impressed with that tweaking and argues that,

... if living proofs in lifeless objects [*eulogiae*] demonstrate the ancient truth for today’s belief, then with what reverence must this man be regarded, with whom God deigned to converse, before whom God’s face was not concealed...? ... Valgius is the living earth on which we see impressed the traces of the Lord’s body, if with the eye of faith and spiritual sight we scrutinize what Christ’s bosom and Christ’s hand have touched in him... [we] touch the tender ear which heavenly fingers pulled when the Lord played His joke. (Walsh 1967:191)

Paulinus even opines that “I have so incessantly fingered his ear, that I have almost worn it away; I should have liked to cut off a part of that... ear, except that such a token [*pignus*] would have meant wounding him!” (Walsh 1967:191). As a relic, there seems to be little difference between a bit of dust or oil and this man, excepting that Valgius/Victor could talk, could tell his own story. But even this was not a significant difference because, although others had to tell their stories, relics always had the ability to “speak,” a quality perhaps most vividly encountered in pilgrim accounts and as a feature of reliquaries.

In turning to documentary material about the context of relics we turn more precisely to issues of the response to relics. In particular, I would contend that reliquaries and their presentation propose a complex instruction of the body and the senses, the teaching of *reverentia*. Details of the development of such conventional behavior is most clearly evident and well-documented in surviving Holy Land pilgrim accounts. Although most of the accounts are bare-bone itineraries, some report vivid stories that speak to a well-developed integration of relics into the Christian imagination. It must be noted, however, that the encounter of pilgrim and relic may have been more immediate and emotional, and was certainly less regulated, than was relic presentation in the later Medieval West.

Once more stories (and their material equivalent — reliquaries) are essential. It is context and story that arouses the interest of the audience and makes the contact with the relic significant and even wondrous. In the milieu of late Antique pilgrimage, contexts could be and were supplied in many forms — spoken words, architectural settings (Frank 2000; and Hahn 1997b), and even simple labels. Gary Vikan has even demonstrated the use of role-playing in which pilgrims, in pious performance, might take on the persona of the Three Magi at the site of the Nativity (Vikan 1990). However, without fail, one particular ceremony, the reading of a story — whether Gospel text or the *vita* of a saint — was always performed at pilgrim sites.

Readings, spiritual preparation, and physical experiences conditioned the faithful to explore the holy sites in their imaginations. Jerome describes the matron Paula at Golgotha as falling before the cross “as if she could see the Lord hanging on it.” At Bethlehem, “with the eyes of faith, she saw a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, weeping in the Lord’s manger.”⁸ Paula herself writes to a friend, Marcella, claiming, “As often as we enter [the Lord’s sepulchre] we see the Savior in His grave clothes, and if we linger we see again the angel sitting at His feet, and the napkin folded at His head.”⁹ Pilgrim itineraries are

⁸) Jerome *Ep.* 108.9.2 and 108.10 as cited by Frank 2000:106. Frank also mentions that Paula licks and kisses objects she encounters.

⁹) Jerome *Ep.* 46.5 as cited by Frank 2000:107.

presented as programs of successive sights, series of “sensory wonders,” or even visions (Frank 2000:108–13).

As a 4th-century bishop wrote in a homily concerning pilgrim visitors to the Oak of Mamre, the imagination expands even beyond the events of the place:

...with the sight of the holy places, they renew the picture in their thinking, behold [the patriarch Moses] in their minds... reflect... on his descendants... and with the recollection... become spectators [to]... history.¹⁰

When Paula speaks of “lingering” at the Sepulchre to see more, apparently she seems to be discussing a process in which the vision that she experiences develops gradually and moves to different aspects of the story and its meaning — the piteous body of Christ, the angel messengers, the “relic” testimony of the shroud. Both of these late antique authors cast their discussions and images in conventional enough Biblical terms — these are not mystical visions. Instead, they are visions and visualizations that could be readily encouraged by pictorial imagery and a structuring of the site. However, they only begin with aspects taken in with the corporeal eyes and they progress through the experience of the “eyes of the faith” to become part of the pilgrim’s “thinking.” That is, parts are integrated by the memory — revolved in the mind and portrayed on the “tablets of the heart” (in Gregory the Great’s words; Hahn 2001:49). In the end they serve the soul in a sort of *imitatio Christi*. As Athanasius wrote in the fourth century of the pilgrim experience of a group of nuns:

You have seen the place of the Nativity: he has given birth to your souls anew. You have seen the place of the crucifixion: let the world be crucified to you and you to the world. You have seen the place of the ascension: your minds are raised up.¹¹

But we still need to understand more about the parameters of corporeal vision and what it could do for the faithful. Once again, Paulinus

¹⁰ *Hom.* 9.2 (translated in Hunt 1982:103) and cited by Frank 2000.

¹¹ “Letter to Virgins Who Went and Prayed in Jerusalem and Returned,” 6, ed. by Brakke, *Athanasius*, 294. Cited and discussed by Frank 2000:111.

of Nola sets out the possibilities, forcefully arguing that some use of vision, especially the sight of the relic of the true cross, could be a genuinely powerful and effective means of access to the divine for the faithful in the early Middle Ages.

In his comments on vision, Paulinus insists on a gradation of the powers of looking, one level obtains for the newly converted and another for the fully initiated Christian. He condescendingly allows that the rustics might “gape” at Old Testament frescoes. He justifies his use of the paintings in the basilica he has built at Nola as a substitute for the uncontrolled feasting that generally occurred. Instead of gorging themselves on food, as he says, “they roam around, their unsophisticated minds beguiled in devotion.” In supplying this “eye candy” Paulinus hopes that the paintings would “excite [their] interest by their attractive appearance” but he also expects that they will

... point out and read over to each other the subjects painted... In this way, as the paintings beguile their hunger, their astonishment may allow better behavior to develop in them... as they gape, their drink is sobriety.

He concludes by arguing that, “They have spent their time on the wonders of the place” (Walsh 1975:290–2; Miller 1997). Clearly, these rustic devotees are not looking at relics or reliquaries. Here instead, we are concerned with the general shrine complex that Paulinus has so carefully constructed. The tomb itself has only a simple silver covering, but he has taken care to create a beautiful setting for the spiritual benefit of the devotees. Paulinus’ thoughts on the evocation of devotion and “wonder” through looking do not, by any means, end here. He begins his description of Nola in talking to a fellow bishop. No barely initiated rustic, the bishop too is encouraged to look at the paintings, to “crane your neck a little till you take in everything with face tilted back. The man who looks at these and acknowledges the truth within these empty figures nurtures his believing mind with representations by no means empty” (Walsh 1975:189). Paulinus describes an act of looking that takes an effort and takes time, may even strain the neck a little and cause physical discomfort. At the same moment that he apologizes for the empty figures, he claims that the “representations” are not empty. Just as with the Eastern Fathers, one is looking not with the eyes but with the mind.

Finally, Paulinus reserves for himself a very special kind of looking. In describing the relic of the true cross that he had received from the Jerusalem pilgrim Melania, he recommends yet a third mode of looking. As noted above, his own vision is a meditative gaze accompanied by a multivalent consideration of the symbolism of the “invulnerability of Christ’s sign” — the cross (Walsh 1975:152–4). His vision focuses on a tiny relic and, in response, opens up to the full implications of faith. Perhaps now that he is not looking at “empty figures” but at the true cross, his vision can be meditative, expansive, timeless, and true.

How does this vision work? Paulinus gives us details scattered throughout his writing. Perhaps it is fair to say that his primary concern is the purification of the senses. He describes the potential impact of sight after Baptism — vision that has the potential to reconfigure the soul (Hahn 2001:55). Elsewhere, however, although he uses baptismal imagery, he describes a more difficult process of the hard work of eradicating sin in all its many forms. Only after the soul is cleansed can one use the senses properly: “Once our senses have been cleansed of all that gives rise to wickedness, our Lord Jesus Christ will gladly walk in them: in them as in the five porticoes, will stroll Wisdom . . .” (Walsh 1967:158). In the *Dialogues*, Gregory the Great argues that true wonders are seen “with spiritual vision, purified with acts of faith and abundant prayers” (Zimmerman 1959:200), and proceeds to describe a vision that Saint Benedict experienced in which he was able to witness the ascension of another saint’s soul to heaven (St. Germanus). During this miracle “all the powers of his mind unfolded, and he saw the whole world gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light.”¹² This process is similar to what Paulinus described, a close focus followed by an opening up of understanding. It is as if only the small aperture can let in the light. In other words, again, the small size of the relic actually helps to focus the mind of the devout.

Paulinus was privileged enough to possess a personal relic of the true cross. What, in fact, did the average pilgrim really see? Even in the

¹² Zimmerman 1959:201. This was Benedict watching the soul of Germanus, Bishop of Capua, rise into heaven. See Monfrin 1991:37–49.

East, where the Piacenza pilgrim writes avidly of touching many sacred relics, access was not always granted (Frank 2000:119–20). In writing of the new shrine at Tebessa built by Bishop Alexander in the fourth century, the possibilities of sight are extolled:

Where once long rest had robbed them from our gaze, they blaze with light on a fitting pedestal, . . . From all around the Christian people, young and old, flow in to see them, happy to tread the holy threshold, singing their praises and hailing with outstretched hands the Christian faith. (Brown 1981:37–8)

Characteristically the relics are bathed in light and the faithful are filled with joy in seeing them. But can they really see them? This passage describes a liturgical ceremony filled with chanting and arms uplifted in prayer, not rapt contemplation. The faithful knew that in the center of the new church, the relics were lifted and celebrated, but could they really *see* them?

At the shrine of Thecla in Seleucia devotees had visions of the saint sitting in the center of the church and, indeed she was “visible to all eyes,” even though the shrine *did not possess* the relics of the saint (Dagron 1978:295; and Hahn 1997b). In the West, at the shrine of Saint Peter, if one were lucky enough to be granted the golden keys that unlocked the grille at the tomb, one then had to insert one’s head into a *fenestella* (or small window), presumably into a dark space, to see what? Probably the only visible object was the exterior of the sarcophagus holding the saint (similar to the arrangement reconstructed at Sant-Ambrogio in Milan, Hahn 1999).

Throughout the middle ages, as in these early cases, the faithful almost never had an unobstructed view of relics: grilles intervened, distances were maintained, containers with sheets of gold “like mirrors” deflected the gaze from the relic.¹³

Even if the relic was presented to view, who might be capable of “seeing” relics? This is a question that is raised in a number of contexts: miracles are seen by some but not by others. Commentators insist that to have true visions one must prepare the mind for veneration that allows ascent to a higher level. Gregory of Tours describes the relic in a cross at Bazas as a crystallized drop of divine mercy that fell from the

¹³ Miller 1997, citing Prudentius *Peristephanon*.

vaults to the altar and, “When it is adored will appear crystal clear to a man free from sin; but if as often happens, some evil is attached to the frail human nature of the beholder, appears totally obscure” (Brown 1982). An eleventh-century miracle among those associated with Foy has “innocent” witnesses see a white dove carry off a body part while a criminal sees a black and white magpie (Sheingorn 1995:45). In 957, a Byzantine court official delivered a speech concerning the arm of John the Baptist in which he asked that the arm be “present through your miracle-working and holy hand appearing entire to the worthy, appearing fully visible to the pure of mind and being fully present at all times in this holy sanctuary (the Pharos).” In turn he asks the relic to look and behold the honors of the cult organized in its (his) honor (Kalavrezou 1997:77).

But in a more mundane sense, among the laity, adequate preparation is essential for the sight of relics. In discussing the relics of Constantinople and after sorting the sources and condemning some (the Western ones) as hopelessly confused, George Majeska concludes that certain viewers, in this case, the Russians, “came to Constantinople to see those marks of God’s activity on earth about which they had heard since childhood. Thus they were capable of understanding what they saw” (Majeska 1973:72). It could be said that without long lessons in the meaning of relics, both general and specific, audiences quite literally could not see. It becomes one of the primary tasks of the early Western church to teach congregations how to approach, venerate, and even, *how to see* relics.

Our discussion thus far has for the most part concerned the treatment and status of relics. We have touched briefly on visual representations on the Ottonian reliquaries, but at this moment must delve more deeply into the potential of reliquaries to guide viewers and their perceptions and beliefs.

A first and perhaps most important quality of reliquaries is consonant with questions raised above about the question and propriety of the visibility of relics. That is, reliquaries generally *hide* the relics they contain; *protect* them from profane sight. One might instead imagine that relics were obscured because clerics were overly concerned with ecclesiastical control and safeguarding of relics. Surely these concerns have something to do with the hiding of relics. Another alternative is

aesthetic: in circa 1100 Thiofrid of Echternach, who insists that relic and reliquary are truly a single unit, argues that without the compensatory beauty of the reliquary, a relic could be repulsive (Ferrari 1996:xxiii, xxvii; and Ferrari 2005). Ultimately, however, in the widely scattered and disparate comments about reliquaries, the most common approach asserts that relics should not be seen, indeed that proper decorum insisted that they should never be exposed to improper touch or display.

Again stories will help us to understand (just as they helped medieval viewers). A fifth- or sixth-century miracle story concerns a relic of the true cross obtained by St. Peter the Iberian, encased in wax, then wrapped in linen, and finally enclosed in a cassette of gold. On feast days and Sundays, Peter opened the case to adore the relic, but when a young “cubiculaire” did so, the relic turned into a white dove and flew from the palace. Peter was forced to search out a replacement (Frolov 1961:35). The ability of the relic to disguise (or transform) itself and move of its own volition in the miracle is striking but perhaps the foremost message of the miracle is that relics were not to be approached in simple curiosity, especially by those without qualifications.

Gregory the Great commented on the Byzantine custom of kissing and touching relics: “For in the Roman and all the western parts it is unendurable and sacrilegious for anyone by any chance to desire to touch the bodies of saints: and, if one should presume to do this, it is certain that his temerity will by no means remain unpunished. For this reason we greatly wonder at the custom of the Greeks, who say that they take up the bones of saints; and we scarcely believe it.”¹⁴

Gregory is probably stating an extreme position here, only clearly established at a relatively late date (Gregory writes in the sixth century), but such reluctance to touch comes to be an important and enduring difference between the Eastern and Western approaches to relics.

A reluctance to touch relics and reliquaries is first of all grounded in the Bible and the Biblical prototype of reliquaries, the Ark of the

¹⁴) Gregory the Great *Epistolae*, iv.30, *MGH Epp.* i, 265; trans. and cited Crook 2000:23.

Covenant. In 2 Samuel 6:6–7, touching is explicitly condemned with the most extreme of punishments:

And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. (Also in I Chron 13:9–10)

In reaction, David is frightened and reluctant to move the Ark but finally, when he does so, he follows a protocol where the Ark is celebrated with music, dancing, and sacrifices. Furthermore, the king departs from royal decorum and publicly humbles himself before the Ark by dancing (to the scorn of his wife Michal). Finally, he places the Ark in the carefully prepared space of the Tabernacle.

Miracles associated with processions from the high middle ages recounted by Pierre Sigal, again carry a message that the improper approach to relics can cause serious injury or death (Sigal 1976). Other examples tell of holy fire threatening unapproved viewers (Schrade 1960:38), as well as blindness or paralysis (Dierkens 1999). The exception that proves the rule is the ritual humiliation of relics in which the relics were “exposed.” However, such rituals would not have their impact if they had not been profoundly shocking to sensibilities that had learned a certain sort of *reverentia* toward relics.

Where were relics hidden from view? At first they were concealed in altars. As Paulinus of Nola writes of St Clarus, “It is right that a pure altar covers your body so that God's altar may conceal the temple of Christ.”¹⁵ The reference to the saint's body as a temple may recall the Jewish Temple and biblical sanctions against anyone other than priests entering the Holy of Holies where Jewish “relics” were kept in the ark of the covenant. References to the body as temple shift later in the middle ages and, in the early thirteenth century, Sicardus of Cremona “compared the church building to the heart of man ‘who is the temple of God’ (I Cor 3:17), and the placing of the Eucharist and the relics in

¹⁵) Letter 32.6, Trout 1999:140. And even when placing in the altar, they were shielded from view by veils: Michaud 1999:204, citing the Romano-Germanic Pontifical.

the altar as the closing up of God's commands and the example of the saints in his heart so that he can sincerely claim: 'Thy word I have hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee' (Ps 119:11).¹⁶ Referring to the same text of Psalms, Durandus of Mende, also in the thirteenth century wrote: "We hide these relics in a *capsa*, so as to imitate holding them [the saints] in our heart."¹⁷

These examples emphasize that the interior of the heart (or the altar or reliquary) is the place to keep religious truths and treasures. A slightly different analogy of reliquary to body, from Thiofrid of Echternach at the turn of the twelfth century, compares the wonder of the soul enclosed in the body to the wonders of miracles performed by "dust." He writes:

As the soul itself in the body cannot be seen and yet works its wonders therein, so the precious treasury of dust [relics] works unseen... Who with fast faith touches the outside of the container whether in gold, silver, gems, or fabric, bronze, marble, or wood, he will be touched by that which is concealed inside.¹⁸

Thiofrid's assertion that touching the exterior of the relic container is efficacious obviates any necessity to see or touch the relic itself.

Although Thiofrid's list of the possible materials of reliquaries includes everything from wood to marble and fabric to various metals, the overwhelming number of references to reliquaries in medieval sources specify *gemmis et auro*, that is made "of gems and gold." Robert Favreau traces the phrase to Ovid and notes that it indicates a product of the very highest quality (Favreau 2003:331 n. 36). The materiality of reliquaries cannot be overstated. At this point, suffice it to say that precious materials reflect honor upon relics and, of course, condition their reception by viewers. A rough hierarchy of materials includes, of course, at the top gold and gems, with their biblical associations with heaven. In close proximity are ivory, throughout antiquity associated

¹⁶ "*In altari corpus Domini et reliquias ponere, est mandata Domini et exempla sanctorum memoriter retinere, ut possit dici...* PL 213, 36 *Mitræ* Lib 1, c. 10, cited and discussed by Snoek 1995:190.

¹⁷ Haec [reliquiae] in capsâ recondimus, cum ad imitandum ea in corde retinemus. Durandus *Rationale* 34 lib I c.7. n 23; cited by Snoek 1995:191 n. 96.

¹⁸ Thiofrid II, 3; cited by Angenendt 2002:132ff.

with the body, and crystal, considered the most pure of substances and also associated with heaven.

However, in addition to materials and their associations, reliquaries have other physical qualities that contribute to their meaning. In terms of the imaginative perception of relics, which as Patricia Cox Miller emphasizes is essential to their spiritual understanding, relics are physically distinguished as giving off light, a quality apparent in many of the quotations above. This light is not stable but one that flickers, flashes, and coruscates, in short, is incandescent (Miller 1997). Augustine argued that Stephen's relics brought a healing "light to the whole world" (Miller 1997:233) using a particularly telling metaphor.¹⁹ However, both poetic evocations such as descriptions in Prudentius and Fortunatus, as well as more prosaic miraculous accounts describe relics and reliquaries as literally glowing or shining with light.²⁰ Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that numerous reliquaries take a "lantern" or tower shape such as the example from Conques (Gaborit-Chopin & Taburet-Dalahaye 2001:46–9). The "windows" of such lanterns allowed light to come *out* rather than the gaze to penetrate *inward*. Finally, relics and reliquaries are typically honored with "lights," that is lighted candles and lamps that often are burned continuously or over specified periods of time in devotion to the saint (Dendy 1959). Arnold Angenendt treats the light-producing quality of relics extensively (Angenendt 1997).

In her treatment of the rhetorical consideration of relics, Miller goes yet further in invoking the importance of the work of the imagination, casting it in terms of an aesthetics that transforms relics from bones and dust to beauty and power. In discussing *ekphrasis*, a form of rhetorical description that attempts to evoke the sensations and emotions of the viewer rather than merely describe things in the world, Miller argues that in Asterius's 410 *ekphrasis* at the martyrrium of Saint Euphemia in Asia Minor, the viewer is "positioned as an active participant in the creation of an aesthetics of relics" (Miller 1997:222; Mango

¹⁹ Dronke 2003 dedicates a chapter to the use of fire and light as imaginative images in early medieval texts.

²⁰ Fortunatus describes the arm of Martin: De Nie 1997; Frolow 1961:82, 84, notes accounts of crosses glowing.

1972:37–9). In other words, aesthetics become part of the imaginative understanding of what relics mean. The work, the text, is essentially unfinished and the *rhetor* calls upon the listener and viewer to complete it. I would argue that reliquaries often work in precisely the same fashion, or contribute to this understanding.

The beauty of a reliquary does not, therefore, only function to honor the saint, and mediate the “ugliness” of the relic; it also takes part, along with the beauty of the liturgy, the shrine, hymns, poems, and prayers, in creating or *constructing* the saint and his or her spiritual meaning for (and by) the viewer. Thus beauty is an inalienable and required quality of reliquaries, but rather than being taken for granted as intrinsic to materials or craftsmanship it was actively sought as an experience. As Peter Brown evocatively describes such artistic effort, it is concerned with the making of

...a carefully maintained crescendo of beauty in poetry, in ceremonial, and in shimmering art around a new and obsessive theme... [Gregory of Tours and Fortunatus] turned the *summum malum* of physical death preceded by suffering into a theme into which all that was most beautiful and refined in their age could be compressed. (Brown 1981:85)

At a later moment in the middle ages, to return to where we began, Egbert of Trier (c. 980) turned what is perhaps the ugliest part of the body, the foot, into the “beautiful... feet of [the Apostles] who bring good news of good things!” (Romans 10:15 above fig. 2). He accomplished this transformation as the active patron of one of the most renowned artistic workshops of the day, seeking out new forms of expression for reliquaries. A contemporary praises him for his “grand and celebrated ingenuity” in the use of enamels and the employment of superior artists, and notes that the resulting “admirable form” pleased both “eye and spirit.”²¹ So in addition to winning the admiration of his fellows and eliciting requests from them for *ornamenta* for their own churches, Egbert succeeded in the most important of

²¹) *Exiguam materiam nostram magnum ac celebre ingenium vestrum nobilitabit, cum adjectione vitri, tum compositione artificis elegantis;... destinato operi designatas mittimus species... admirabilem formam et quae mentem et oculos pascat frater efficiat fratri.* Lettres de Gerbert 104:97 as cited by Lesne 1936:183.

aesthetic challenges. He was able to create beauty out of ugly things, beauty that pleased both the “eye and spirit.”

Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen has argued that Egbert set out to impress his fellow clerics and win prestige for his archbishopric specifically through the making of beautiful artworks, principally beautiful manuscripts and the striking reliquaries we have discussed at the beginning of this chapter. She casts Countess Gertrude’s efforts at Braunschweig in much the same light. I would add that as much as fulfilling a desire for political prestige, these patrons were seeking spiritual credit through their contributions to the *ornamenta ecclesiae*, the beautification of the church. A similar effort could be traced in the artistic patronage of Bishop Bernward of Hildesheim, Abbot Wibald of Stavelot and Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, as well as of course, Paulinus of Nola. In other words, the efforts of these renowned patrons to honor the saints of their churches served simultaneously as the engine of artistic innovation and creativity. Perhaps we will have to consider reliquaries to be works of art after all.

It is only in an age that admits that artwork can interact with the viewer, however, that reliquaries can indeed be considered art, for there is surely no doubt that relics and reliquaries act and interact.²² Above we have noted that relics are “lively” and give “gifts” to those who pray to them, gifts of miracles, healing and even conversion. Also above, relics and reliquaries were shown to give off light, reassuring the faithful of their power and presence. Perhaps most striking to the modern mind, however, is the claim that relics (and reliquaries) had the ability to speak and some reliquaries even elicit speech from their devotees, in a process that seeks to teach the faithful Christian truths.²³ With this approach the reliquary has moved from the passive object of the gaze to the speaking subject of its own story. Perhaps this is not surprising given that reliquaries seem have been almost what one could call “restless.” They were lifted, gestured with, carried in processions, opened, and closed. They, like the relics, had a life of their own.

²²) Freedberg 1989 might be credited with initiating this era for art historians.

²³) See my forthcoming book on reliquaries, *Strange Beauty*.

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