

SAINTS AND SACRED MATTER

The Cult of Relics
in Byzantium and Beyond



Edited by

CYNTHIA HAHN AND HOLGER A. KLEIN

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RELIC, ICON, AND ARCHITECTURE

The Material Articulation of the Holy
in East Christian Art

JAŚ ELSNER



MONG THE DEFINING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE WORLD OF THE Roman Empire in its pagan polytheist dispensation and its long life as a Christian commonwealth—what we now call Byzantium—the question of how the holy was understood must be central. I am going to argue that one aspect of the Christian, and especially the Byzantine, redefinition of the holy lies in its passage into a hidden space of mysterious (even mystic) secrecy whose existence was announced and access to which was enabled through material framing and visual representation. That redefinition was already in formation among the various pagan mystery cults (such as Mithraism, with its underground, cavelike temples), which belonged, with Christianity and Judaism, to the great and vibrant substructure of religions, alongside more normative civic cults and the imperial cult, with their open-air spaces for ritual and sacrifice.¹ The origins of secrecy in relation to the holy thus go deep into pre-Christian antiquity, with ancient sources such as Pausanias reporting numerous instances of closed shrines, deities available for epiphany on special occasions—sometimes only one day in the year—rituals and myths that can be revealed only to initiates.² But central to the Christian articulation of these issues is the rise of the cult of relics and the relation of holy material to its packaging and presentation.

Before turning to the main theme of this chapter, the development of a three-dimensional material and textural semiotics for articulating the sacred in the Byzantine world, it is worth dwelling briefly on its antecedents. Despite the occasional enthusiasm among scholars and believers for exaggerating the innovations of Christianity,³ almost all the key aspects of the Christian definition of the holy in material terms were in place for centuries as part of the spirituality and religious practices of pagan

¹ The literature on Roman religion is extremely rich at the moment. An excellent starting point is M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1998). More recently see, e.g., J. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2007), C. Ando, *The Matter of the Gods* (Berkeley, 2008), the essays collected in C. Ando, ed., *Roman Religion* (Edinburgh, 2003), and J. North and S. Price, eds., *The Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2011). Focusing on official cult: J. Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Edinburgh, 2003) and J. Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans* (Cambridge, 2007).

² For a series of passages, see J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge, 1995), 345 n. 69.

³ For instance, M. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (Ithaca, 1988), 20, for the (entirely mistaken) view that Christianity provided for the first time the space and audience for first-person travel narratives.

Polytheism. I think not only of epiphany and secrecy,⁴ but of pilgrimage and of relics as hallowed objects,⁵ even of their containers (which in the Christian context come down to reliquaries and church treasures).⁶ Of course, survivals of actual sacred objects are very poor and uncertain; which is hardly surprising in the face of Christian determination to demolish all aspects of pagan idolatry,⁷ and by contrast with the remarkable cultural continuity that has seen Christian sacred objects survive in church treasures and collections for as long as 1,500 years. But the textual evidence—both literary and epigraphic—is rich.⁸

4 On epiphany, see now V. Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge, 2011).

5 On pilgrimage, see B. Köting, *Peregrinatio Religiosa: Wallfahrten in der Antike und das Pilgerwesen in der alten Kirche* (Regensburg, 1950), 12–79 and J. Elsner and I. Rutherford, eds., *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (Oxford, 2005). On relics, see F. Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*, 2 vols. (Giessen, 1909 and 1912); A. Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Relique: Objektbezogene Erinnerungspraktiken in antiken Gesellschaften* (Berlin, 2010); R. Osborne, "Relics and Remains in an Ancient Greek World Full of Anthropomorphic Gods," in *Relics and Remains*, ed. A. Walsham (Oxford, 2010), 56–72.

6 A notable reliquary from the fifth century BCE was the temple at Athens, the Theseion, built to house the bones of the hero Theseus that were found by the general Kimon and brought to Athens in around 475 BCE; see Plutarch, *Theseus* 36 and *Cimon* 8; Pausanias 1.17.6 and 3.3.7–8, with Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*, vol. 1:198–204, 412, and 440; and Osborne, "Relics and Remains," esp. 56–57. An interesting treasury (at any rate by the second century CE) was the Heraion at Olympia as described at length by Pausanias 5.16.1–22.6, with K. Arafat, "Pausanias and the Temple of Hera at Olympia," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 90 (1995): 461–73.

7 A large literature: see, e.g., F. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization*, c. 370–529 (Leiden, 1993–94), 1:207–22 (on Gaza), also 2:12–15; E. Sauer, *The Archaeology of Religious Hatred in the Roman and Early Medieval World* (Stroud, 2003), 64–164; J. Hahn, S. Emmel, and U. Gotter, eds., *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2008), esp. papers by J. Hahn and D. Frankfurter; E. Friedland, S. Herbert, and Y. Eliav, eds., *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East* (Leuven, 2008), esp. papers by F. Trombley, D. Frankfurter, and J. Pollini.

8 For a rich conspectus, see L. Lacroix, "Quelques aspects du 'culte de reliques' dans les traditions de la Grèce ancienne," *Bulletin de la Classe des lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques (Académie royale de Belgique)* 75 (1989): 58–99 and Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Relique*, 499–592. For a long list of passages, see J. Boardman, *The Archaeology of Nostalgia: How the Greeks Re-created Their Mythical Past* (London, 2002), 210–33 and discussion at 82–104. The major epigraphic monument is the stele known as the "Lindian List" of 99 BCE, which annotates the offerings made since the mythical past to the temple of

Notably, all these aspects—pilgrimage, a vibrant interest in religion and its material culture (not only sacred objects but also temples, sanctuaries, their topography and layout), and relics and rituals (including all sorts of practices involving concealment and revelation)—are to be found in the marvelous travel book of Pausanias, which describes the sights of mainland Greece in the second half of the second century CE.⁹ We are offered everything from major centers packed with ancient artifacts related to famous historical or mythical figures,¹⁰ via the venerated bones of heroes, their cults and the buildings that house them,¹¹ to wonders such as

Athena Lindia on Rhodes; see C. Blimkernberg, *Lindos: Fouilles de l'acropole 1902–1914*, vol. 2, *Inscriptions* (Berlin, 1941), no. 2 (1:148–99); C. Highie, *The Lindian Chronicle and the Greek Recreation of Their Past* (Oxford, 2003); J. Shaya, "The Greek Temple as Museum: The Case of the Legendary Treasure of Athena from Lindos," *American Journal of Archaeology* 109 (2005): 432–42; Osborne, "Relics and Remains," 61–64; Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 161–69.

9 The literature is now vast. On religion, see J. G. Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece* (London, 1898), xxv–xxviii; J. Heer, *La personnalité de Pausanias* (Paris, 1979), 127–314; W. Hutton, *Describing Greece: Landscape and Literature in the Periegesis of Pausanias* (Cambridge, 2005), 303–22; V. Pirenne-Delforge, *Retour à la source: Pausanias et la religion grecque* (Liège, 2008). On Pausanias as pilgrim, see Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 125–55; I. Rutherford, "Tourism and the Sacred: Pausanias and the Traditions of Greek Pilgrimage," in *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece*, ed. S. Alcock, J. Cherry, and J. Elsner (Oxford, 2001), 40–52; W. Hutton, "The Construction of Religious Space in Pausanias," in Elsner and Rutherford, *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 291–318; Pirenne-Delforge, *Retour à la source*, 98–102; Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Relique*, 49–51. On ritual, see J. Elsner, "Image and Ritual: Reflections on the Graeco-Roman Appreciation of Art," *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996): 515–31 and Pirenne-Delforge, *Retour à la source*, 113–42. On material culture and art, see, e.g., K. Arafat, *Pausanias' Greece: Ancient Artists and Roman Rulers* (Cambridge, 1996), 43–79 and M. Pretzler, *Pausanias: Travel Writing in Ancient Greece* (London, 2007), 103–17. For the detailed study of a single deity as she appears through Pausanias's text, see V. Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque* (Liège, 1994), 15–308; on relics in Pausanias, see Boardman, *Archaeology of Nostalgia*, 216–27 (for a list of 375 passages on relics or specific sites such as tombs related to mythical heroes) and Pirenne-Delforge, *Retour à la source*, 76–77, 210–11.

10 E.g., on Delphi: see L. Lacroix, "A propos des offrandes à l'Apollon de Delphes et du témoignage de Pausanias: Du réel à l'imaginaire," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 116 (1992): 157–76; on Olympia, see Arafat, "Pausanias and the Temple of Hera at Olympia."

11 E.g., the Theseion at Athens, Pausanias 1.17.6 and 3.3.7–8; the bones of Orestes, stolen from Tegea by the Spartans in an act of war and re-interred next to the sanctuary of the Fates at Sparta, 3.3.5, 3.11.10, and 8.54.4, but with a tomb in Arcadia for

Leda's egg or the clay from which Prometheus made man.¹² All this, as a pattern of material objects encased in containers and sacred enclosures, is familiar from the world of medieval relics. And some issues, such as the translations of venerated bodies by all kinds of methods including theft and force, and on the basis of instructions in visions and dreams, are strikingly parallel to the phenomena around Christian relics.¹³ Even the division of whole bodies into parts, which became such a fundamental characteristic of Christian relics, was occasionally anticipated in the relic culture of Greek polytheism, as reported by Pausanias.¹⁴

A rare survival of the ancient genre of *periegesis*,¹⁵ or descriptive travelogue, with a first-person narrator,¹⁶ Pausanias's text brilliantly brings together the significance of material culture (supremely sites and objects from the world of

the finger which Orestes bit off in his madness at 8.34.2; the superhuman bones in the sanctuary of Asclepius near Asopus in Laconia, 3.22.9; the bones of Aristomenes in Messenia, 4.32.3; the superhuman-sized but now vanished shoulder of Pelops which had gone from Olympia to Troy and back, 5.13.4–6 and his other bones, 6.22.1; the bones of his wife, Hippodameia, at Olympia, 6.20.7, with B. McCauley, "The Transfer of Hippodameia's Bones: A Historical Context," *Classical Journal* 93 (1998): 225–39; the bones of Tisamenus, son of Orestes, buried at Helice in Achaea but transferred to Sparta at the command of the Delphic oracle, 7.1.8, with D. Leahy, "The Bones of Tisamenus," *Historia* 4 (1955): 26–38; the bones of Areas at Mantinea, 8.9.3, transferred following the instruction of the Delphic oracle from Maenalus, 8.36.8; the giants' bones in the temple of Asclepius at Megalopolis in Arcadia, 8.32.5; the bones of Hector brought from Troy to Thebes following an oracle, 9.18.5; the legend of the lost bones of Linus, taken from Boeotia by Philip of Macedon following a dream and then returned on the instructions of a second dream, 9.29.8–9; the bones of the poet Hesiod at Orchomenus, 9.38.3–4; the bones of Arecesilaus, brought from Troy to Lebedaea in Boeotia, 9.39.3.

12 Leda's egg in the temple of Hilaeira and Phoebe in Laconia: Pausanias 3.16.1; Prometheus's clay at Panopeus in Phocis: 10.4.4.

13 See Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*, 188–211 and 433–44; Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Relique*, 246–64 with further bibliography.

14 Examples include the body of Orestes at Sparta (Pausanias, 3.3.5, 3.11.10, and 8.54.4) but his finger in Arcadia, 8.34.2; or the separation of the shoulder of Pelops, 5.13.4–6, from his other bones, 6.22.1.

15 On genre, see J. Lightfoot, *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess* (Oxford, 2003), 87–91, 162–63, 218; Hutton, *Describing Greece*, 2.41–334; Pretzler, *Pausanias*, 44–56.

16 For a narratological account, see J. Akujärvi, *Researcher, Traveller, Narrator: Studies in Pausanias's Periegesis* (Lund, 2005).

religion)¹⁷ with the rich myth-historical narratives which holy places, works of art, and relics come to epitomize.¹⁸ Pausanias reinvents Greece (*pasa Hellas*, in a quotation from the elegiac inscription on the statue of the liberator Epaminondas, 9.15.6) as "all things Greek" (*panta ta hellenika*, 1.26.4)—that is, as a series of items, including all forms of material culture, in which the essence of Greekness is embodied. The structure of his account is at least as literary and ideological as it is a literal representation of actual journeying,¹⁹ and its religious-antiquarian bent conceals a heliocentric politics alongside a near-romanticism for the sublimity of the idea of Greece, which in turn proved a potent inspiration for modern engagements with the myth and the antiquity of Greece.²⁰ It is always difficult to generalize from the single example—especially when we posit that it reliably represents a largely lost genre. But if Pausanias's text is at all typical of the kinds of reactions and responses that were normal in relation to material culture, especially that of religion, in pre-Christian Greek antiquity, then it gives a vivid insight into the ways mythological narratives and specific material markers within the landscape (sites, buildings, objects, relics) were able to combine the traveler's (indeed the pilgrim's) subjective experience of wonder or interest with a history, available from local guides, from

17 See Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 218–226, 266–75 for an excellent discussion of how sacred objects in Pausanias evoke a bigger divine reality.

18 See, e.g., P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* (Chicago, 1988), 95–102; Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 125–55; V. Pirenne-Delforge, "Under Which Conditions Did the Greeks 'Believe' in Their Myths? The Religious Criteria of Adherence," in *Antike Mythen: Medien, Transformationen und Konstruktionen*, ed. U. Dill and C. Walde (Berlin, 2009), 38–54.

19 See J. Elsner, "Structuring 'Greece': Pausanias's Periegesis as a Literary Construct," in Alcock, Cherry, and Elsner, *Pausanias*, 3–20; and W. Hutton, "Pausanias and the Mysteries of Hellas," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140 (2010): 423–59.

20 On the politics see C. Habicht, *Pausanias's Guide to Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1985), 117–64 and S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire* (Oxford, 1996), 333–56. On the Pausanian sublime, see J. Porter, "Ideals and Ruins: Pausanias, Longinus and the Second Sophistic," in Alcock, Cherry, and Elsner, *Pausanias*, 63–92. On modern engagements, the essays of Sutton, Wagstaff, Henderson, Beard, and Bann in Alcock, Cherry, and Elsner, *Pausanias* and those by Harloe, Pretzler, Elsner, Gaißman, and MacCormack in *Classical Receptions Journal* 2 (2010), a special issue on *Receptions of Pausanias from Winckelmann to Frazer*.

books, and from hearsay. Together, objects and myth-histories came to comprise a meaningful sense of the present, living with and through the glories of the past.²¹

What the Christian culture of the relic did was to reduce the vastness of the network of mythological connections evoked by objects to a series of specifically sacred referents, namely Christ and his saints. At the same time and alongside the reduction of the range of kinds of referents went a move toward largely canonical texts (rather than the endless proliferation of oral traditions), which were either scriptural or hagiographic.²² This is a specific case of the “draining away of the secular,” which has been identified as a key factor in the process of Christian identity-formation in the early middle ages,²³ and it relates to the fact that almost all relics came to be of saints or of objects directly connected to holy persons, rather than to potentially nonreligious luminaries, such as historical, mythical, or literary figures (like the heroes of mythology or the poet Pindar, which we find in Pausanias). What we cannot know in the case of pre-Christian antiquity—because our material evidence is simply insufficient and our evidential base just not precise enough—are the strategies of framing, packaging, and inscribing relics so that bones or items connected with a specific hero could be identified and given appropriate devotion by

²¹ Other texts of the period that offer parallels include the *De Dea Syria* of Lucian (with Lightfoot, *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess*, and J. Elsner, “Describing Self in the Language of Other: Pseudo(?)-Lucian at the Temple of Hierapolis,” in *Being Greek under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire*, ed. S. Goldhill [Cambridge, 2001], 123–53) and the *Heroueus* of Philostratus (with, e.g., F. Zeitlin, “Visions and Revisions of Homer,” in Goldhill, *Being Greek under Rome*, 195–266, esp. 213–15, 255–66; T. Whitmarsh, “Performing Heroics: Language, Landscape and Identity in Philostratus,” in *Philostratus*, ed. E. Bowie and J. Elsner [Cambridge, 2009], 205–29; I. Rutherford, “Black Sails to Achilles: The Thessalian Pilgrimage in Philostratus,” in Bowie and Elsner, *Philostratus*, 230–47; Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 240–52).

²² For an interesting account of the ascription of holiness through hagiographic writing to specific objects, see (on Eusebius) H. Meredith, “Christianizing Constantine: Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* as a Late Antique Social Canvas,” in *Objects in Motion: The Circulation of Religion and Sacred Objects in the Late Antique and Byzantine World*, ed. eadem (Oxford, 2011), 7–24.

²³ See R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), 225–8.

those who sought to visit or venerate them. This is the kind of information that our texts hardly describe (and never with any precision) and our archaeology cannot deliver. It is here that the long survival of venerated artifacts in Christian places of worship allows a kind and depth of art-historical study simply not possible for the relics and sacred images of pagan polytheism.

The Christian cult of relics exploded into the middle ages at some point in the fourth century—in the 360s roughly in Italy in the pontificate of Damasus and the episcopal reign of Ambrose in Milan,²⁴ and in the East either as early as Constantine’s own use of relics in the 330s in his mausoleum (a moot and recently much discussed question) or sometime in the next generation.²⁵ Now a relic in the Christian context is certainly holy. It pulsates with the presence of the saint who once owned or handled it, or from whose body it has been preserved. It offers access not only directly, but also through such objects as may have come into contact with it,²⁶ which

²⁴ On Damasus, see C. Pietri, *Roma Christiana* (Rome, 1976), 1:514–51, 595–624; J. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 2000), 142–57; M. Sághy, “Pope Damasus and the Martyrs of Rome,” *EME* 9 (2000): 273–88. On Ambrose, see E. Dassmann, “Ambrosius und die Märtyrer,” *JbAC* 18 (1975): 49–68 and N. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan* (Berkeley, 1994), 209–17, 226–36, 347–45. On the fourth-century West, see G. Clark, “Translating Relics: Victricius of Rouen and the Fourth-Century Debate,” *EME* 10 (2001): 161–76 and in general on the West, P. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978) and idem, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994), 41–44, 177–220; P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (London, 1981), 87–94.

²⁵ In favor of 336 for the transfer of the relics of Luke and Andrew, see R. Burgess, “The *Passio S. Artemii, Philostorgii, and the Dates of the Invention and Translations of the Relics of Sts. Andrew and Luke*,” *AB* 121 (2003): 5–36; M. Johnson, *The Roman Imperial Mausoleum in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2009), 119–29, cautiously; J. Bardill, *Constantine: Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2012), 367–73; in favor of 356/57—the traditional date—see D. Woods, “Libanius, Bemarchius and the Mausoleum of Constantine I,” in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History XIII*, Collection Latomus 301, ed. C. Deroux (Brussels, 2006), 428–39 and J. Wortley, *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204* (Aldershot, 2009), 215–20. For a conspectus of the issues in the written sources, see C. Mango, “Constantine’s Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics,” *BZ* 83 (1990): 51–62 and 434. For the possible transfer of the relics of the martyr Lucian to the city of Helenopolis founded by Constantine in memory of his mother, see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 221.

²⁶ Known as *brandea* in studies of the medieval West. See J. McCulloh, “The Cult of Relics in the Letters and ‘Dialogues’

themselves may carry holy or healing qualities. Yet how can we know that any given bit of bone or skin or cloth or earth is what people claim it is?²⁷ This is not just a problem of cognitive reliability (like whether we believe what is in the newspapers). It is a fundamental and ontological issue in a culture for which such objects are among the most prestigious items in existence—bestowers of healing, authority, power, sanctity, and social and sacred distinction. Only the packaging—the frame or many frames in which the item is encased, its decorative and iconographic richness, its precision of inscribed information, its preciousness—can act as guarantee of the preciousness of the object, simultaneously valueless and priceless, that is placed within.²⁸

The holy is guaranteed by the three-dimensional frame in which it must be housed (alongside that frame’s combination of images and texts), but it is also hidden and made secret by its

of Pope Gregory the Great,” *Traditio* 32 (1976): 145–84, esp. 165–69.

²⁷ Cf. Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 5. A. Walsham, “Introduction: Relics and Remains,” in Walsham, *Relics and Remains*, 9–36, at 14 describes the imputation of holiness to such objects as a “social and cognitive process,” which is of course true, but misses the key point that it is also a material process, whereby visual and architectural means are used, in addition to writing, to determine that a bit of bone is holy.

²⁸ We still await a comprehensive study of relics in eastern Christendom. Only with such a study can the Byzantine relic be fully evaluated in relation both to the icon and to the cult of relics in the West. But as a starting point, from the historical point of view, see Wortley, *Cult of Relics* and from an art-historical angle, see the essays in A. Lidov, ed., *Early Christian Relics* (Moscow, 2003); C. Antonova, *Space, Time and Presence in the Icon* (Aldershot, 2010), 74–76; and C. Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries*, 400 to c. 1204 (University Park, 2012), chapter 13. On the West, J. Braun, *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (Freiburg, 1940) is fundamental, and more recently (but hardly visual or material-cultural) see N. Herrmann-Mascard, *Les reliques des saints: Formation coutumière d’un droit* (Paris, 1973); A. Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien: Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1994); and G. Snock, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden, 1995). For the rise of the Christian cult of relics in the context of and in continuity with the relic-cults of pre-Christian antiquity, see Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*, 2:429–44 and 607–26, and now Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Relique*, 593–660. For some interesting theoretical reflections on relics (in relation to western material), see B. Fricke, *Ecce Fides: Die Statue von Conques, Götzendienst und Bildkultur im Westen* (Munich, 2007); S. Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York, 2008); C. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011).

boxing away in a dispensation wherein its box participates through opulent display.²⁹ The hidden relic is so much more special because of the visual, material, and sensual richness of its container, so much more valuable because of the precious items included in its frame. Moreover, the boxing away instantly creates a further dispensation of opening and revealing—the potential showing of a usually hidden mystery on a given occasion or to a special audience.³⁰ That is, concealment is also the opportunity for a performative theatricality of ostentation.³¹ This material discourse of concealment also inevitably and inescapably places that which is to be commemorated—whether the body of the

²⁹ For thoughts on the relationship of reliquary and relic, see C. Hahn, “Metaphor and Meaning in Early Medieval Reliquaries,” in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. G. de Nie, K. Morrison, and M. Mostert (Turnhout, 2005), 239–64, esp. 239–41, and C. Hahn, “What Reliquaries Do for Relics,” *Numen* 57 (2010): 284–316, esp. 305–8 (this last on mainly Ottonian material).

³⁰ On issues of secrecy, hiddenness, and indeed potential invisibility of the object across art history, see the recent issue of *Res* 55–56 (2009) for a series of essays on “absconding.”

³¹ It is not my subject here, but arguably the ekphrastic tradition, as it developed in Byzantium, is extremely sympathetic to this process of penetrating concealed mysteries and unveiling the hidden: see, e.g., L. James and R. Webb, “To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium,” *AH* 14 (1991): 1–17. In the architectural tradition, the twelfth-century ekphrasis of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople by Nicholas Mesarites is a wonderful example and model for this kind of interpretation. After dwelling on the exterior of the building (ch. 1–11), the ekphrasis enters at chap. 12 where Mesarites writes:

Now, however, it is time for us to proceed in our description to the things within the church and to look at them with the eyes of sense and to understand them with the eyes of the spirit. For the spirit is wont to advance from those things which are perceived by the senses and, led by the lesser faculty, to understand ultimate things and penetrate to the secret places.

Trans. Glanville Downey.

The account then proceeds brilliantly to offer an entire version of the Christian dispensation posing as descriptions of the images on the vault and walls before moving at chap. 38 to the sanctuary, “the curved space . . . which encloses within itself, like a point, as it were, or rather like a kind of heart which holds the whole body of the Church together,” and its reliques: “The holy table of Christ itself conceals within itself, like an inviolate treasure, the bodies of Luke and Andrew and Timothy, who sacrificed themselves for Him.” It concludes with the imperial tombs (chs. 39–40), a return to the exterior (chs. 41–42), and an encomium of the Patriarch (ch. 43). See Nicholas Mesarites, “Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople,” ed. G. Downey, *TAPS* 47 (1957): 855–924.

FIG. 1.1
Brescia Casket,
front: box for relics
or the Eucharist,
ivory, second
half of the fourth
century CE. Museo
Civico dell'Età
Cristiana, Brescia,
Italy. (Photo
courtesy Scala/
Art Resource, NY)

Christian dead or the relic of the holy—within an architectural context. By this I mean the building of boxes and frames of various kinds which by their ever-more-elaborate nature (whether these be decorative, textual, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, materially differentiated from the sacred center contained inside, or whatever) come to articulate, through visual rhetoric, the special particularity, the sanctity of what is held within the box. That kind of building creates a spatial sense of interior and exterior, of barriers to be penetrated, of secrets to be unveiled, which—even in two-dimensional representations and even in miniature³²—may be called *architectural*.³³

Early Christian Origins

Now the relation of the holy to its concealment in boxes arises early in Christianity. Arguably, the Christianess of the Christian dead can be

³² On microarchitecture, see E. Thomas, "Houses of the Dead? Columnar Sarcophagi as 'Micro-Architecture,'" in *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. J. Elsner and J. Huskinson (Berlin, 2011), 387–435.

³³ My model of the architectural in relation to icons is thus different from and more directly materially inflected than that discussed by B. Pentcheva, "Visual Textuality: The *Logos* as Pregnant Body and Building," *Res* 45 (2004): 225–38 in relation to the theological notion of the *logos* and to the imagery of architecture in Byzantine images from miniatures to paintings and mosaics. Nor is it indebted to the interesting historiography of the study of "reverse perspective," on which see Antonova, *Space, Time and Presence*, 29–62, with bibliography. Nor is it related to the specific uses of images (all of them called "icons" in Byzantium) to decorate architectural space in churches or niches specially made for them, as in, e.g., A. M. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean* (Cambridge, 2009), 233–85. Nor is it inflected by the issue of icons in relation to specific sites, as explored by G. Wolf, "Icons and Sites: Cult Images of the Virgin in Mediaeval Rome," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Aldershot, 2005), 23–50 or in the majority of essays collected by A. Lidov, ed., *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (Moscow, 2006).

Again, it does not pursue a promising line opened by L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (Oxford, 1996), 41–46, 128–38 on the relations of color, form, and alchemy in Byzantium, all of which surely have architectural ramifications. Likewise it has nothing to do with the notion of "iconic space" and the role of images in the Byzantine economy, as conceived by M.-J. Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford, 2005). It does however have something in common with some of the specifically architectural issues about the conception of the icon discussed by S. Ćurić, "Architecture as Icon," in *Architecture as Icon*, ed. S. Ćurić and E. Hadjityphonos (New Haven, 2010), 3–37 and with the spaciality insisted upon by Lidov's introduction to *Hierotopy*, 32–58.

³⁴ See A. de Waal, "Zur Chronologie des Bassus-Sarkophags in den Grotten von Sankt Peter," *RQ* 21 (1907): 117–34, esp. 117–20.

³⁵ The fundamental literature includes A. de Waal, *Der Sarkophag des Junius Bassus* (Rome, 1909); F. Gerke, *Der Sarkophag des Junius Bassus* (Berlin, 1936); G. Bovini and H. Brandenburg, *Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage*, vol. 1, *Rom und Ostia* (Wiesbaden, 1967), no. 680, pp. 279–83; J. Gaertner, "Zur Deutung des Junius-Bassus-Sarkophagen," *JDAI* 83 (1968): 249–64; E. S. Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton, 1990).

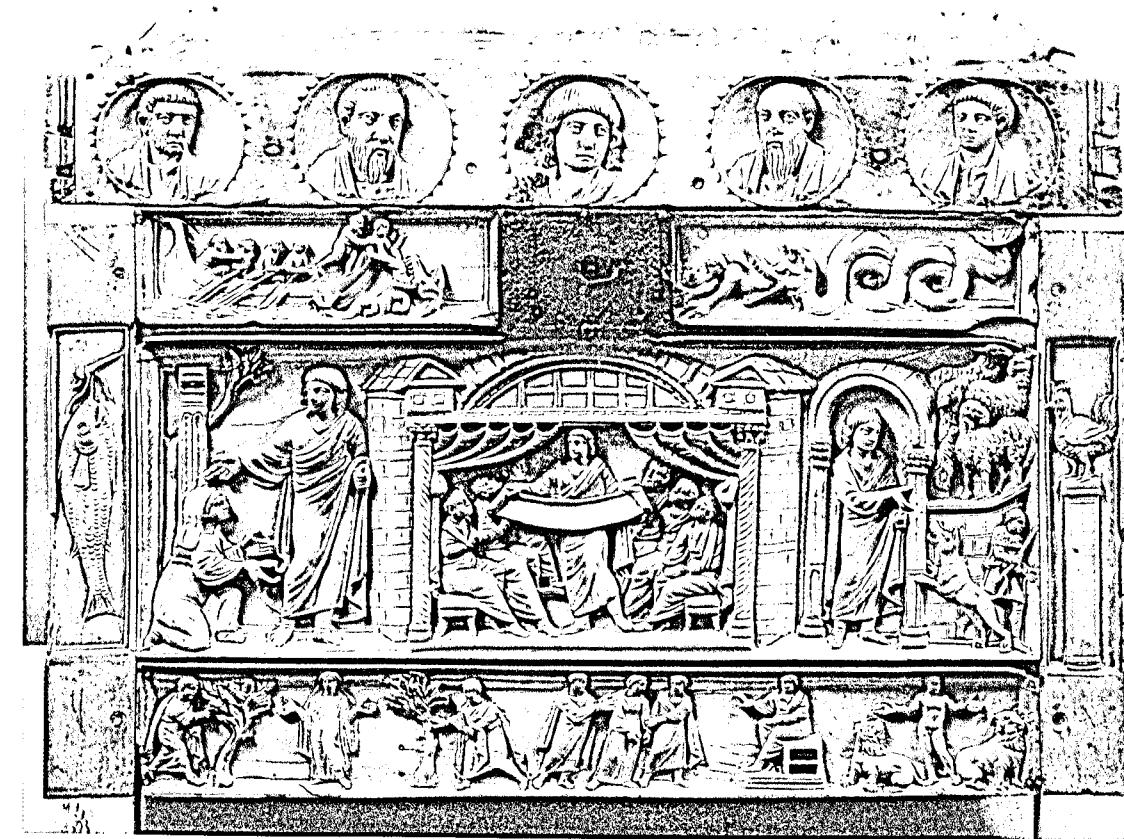
³⁶ For the prose inscription on the upper rim, see Malbon, *Junius Bassus*, 1–2; for the verse inscription on the lid, see Al. Cameron, "The Funeral of Junius Bassus," *ZPapEpig* 139 (2002): 288–92.

³⁷ See Cameron, "Funeral of Junius Bassus," and J. Elsner, "Art and Text," in *A Companion to Latin Literature*, ed. S. Harrison (Oxford, 2005), 300–318, esp. 305–7; Malbon, *Junius Bassus*, 114–16 is fundamentally vitiated on the lid inscription by lack of command of the Latin and the rules of scansion.

³⁸ More on this in J. Elsner, "Inventing Christian Rome: The Role of Early Christian Art," in *Rome: The Cosmopolis*, ed. C. Edwards and G. Woolf (Cambridge, 2003), 71–99, esp. 83–87.

affirmed only by the choice to place Christian iconography and epigraphic commentary in catacombs and on sarcophagi. To give a brief account of a classic example, the great sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, made in Rome to contain the body of the urban prefect (the city's most senior official and a man of senatorial rank), by its exceptional placement (as close as possible to the tomb of St. Peter itself),³⁴ and by its exceptional visual decoration,³⁵ as well as by its inscriptions,³⁶ marks the signal importance of the man buried within. In particular, in addition to and beyond his civic identity and the grief proclaimed by the verse inscription on the lid,³⁷ the coffin's spectacular iconography of New Testament, Old Testament, and Apostolic themes concerning Peter and Paul—combined with the prose inscription on the upper lip of the main base, which places the words *urbi neofitus iit ad deum* ("newly baptized in the city he went to God") immediately above the image of Christ in majesty seated over a personification of the world and handing the law to Peter and Paul—unambiguously marks the Christian confessional identity of the deceased man.³⁸

These kinds of objects announce faith and assert identity. The shift of visual strategies from announcing the Christian identity of the dead to affirming, even defining, the sacred was swift and is not wholly surprising since, in the decades after the Peace of the Church, the contents of



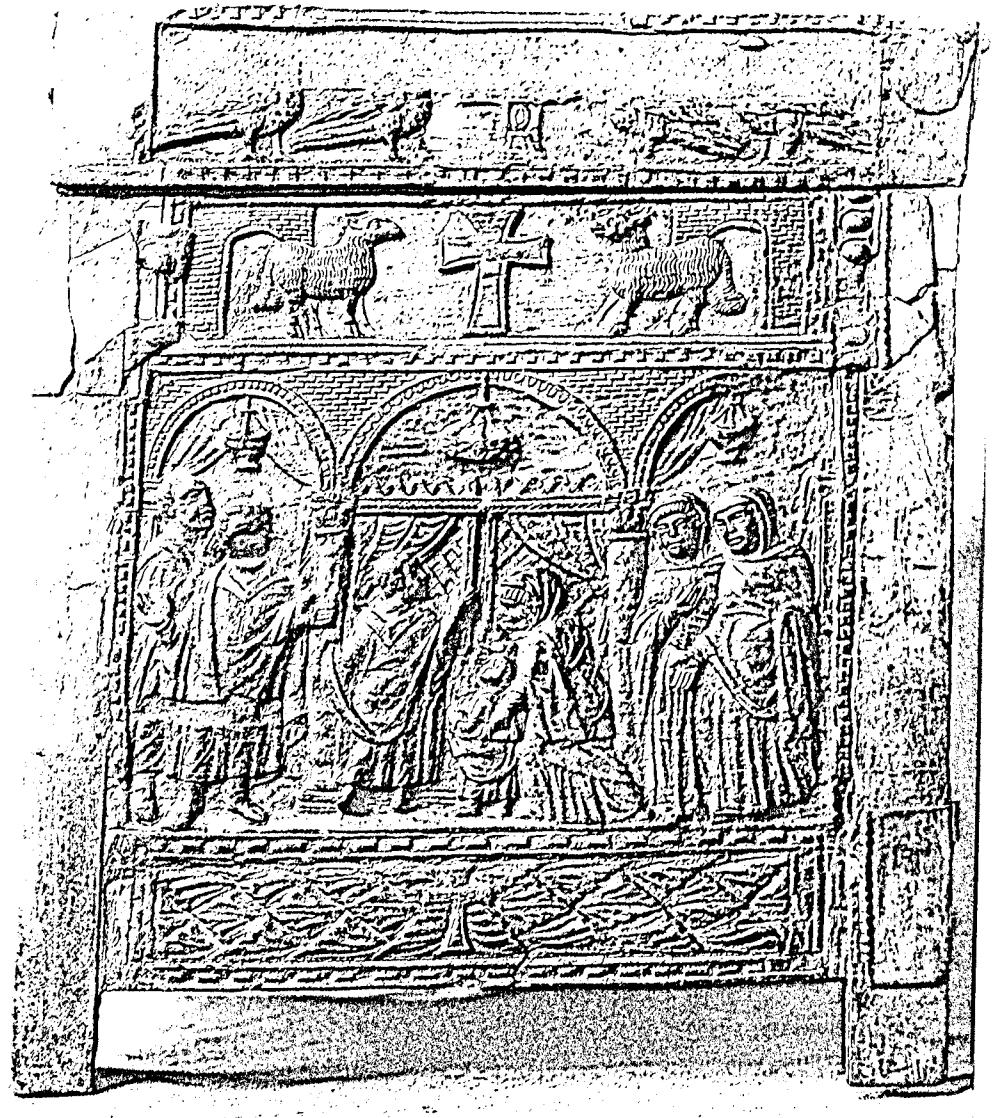
such sarcophagi and catacombs were discovered to contain the very bones of martyrs, confessors, and other saints. A relatively simple example is the small gilded silver box from the late fourth or early fifth century known as the Capsella Brivio (12 × 5.7 × 5.5 cm), which was found near Lake Como and is now in the Louvre. The iconography of the Raising of Lazarus on the lid, and the Adoration of the Magi and the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace on the two long sides, not only advertises Christian content but—through iconographic selection—emphasizes the Incarnation (in the Epiphany scene), the possibility of salvation (in the Three Hebrews scene, whose protagonists echo the Magi in both number and Persian dress), and the centrality of Christ to the process of salvation (in the Lazarus image).³⁹

³⁹ See G. Noga-Banai, *The Trophies of the Martyrs: An Art Historical Study of Early Christian Silver Reliquaries* (Oxford, 2008), 38–61, 158 with bibliography. On the class of objects see H. Buschhausen, *Diespiätömische Metallscrinia und frühchristliche Reliquiare* (Vienna, 1971).

⁴⁰ See C. B. Tkacz, *The Key to the Brescia Casket* (Notre Dame, 2002) with earlier bibliography.

FIG. 1.2

Pola Casket, left side: reliquary found under the altar of a church in Samagher, Istria, ivory and silver, fourth or fifth century CE. Museo Archeologica Nazionale, Venice. (Photo courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, NY)



bands of Old Testament images which serve as prototypes of Christian salvation.⁴¹

The theme of concealment and revelation is placed center stage in the imagery of a second early Christian ivory box, either late fourth- or early fifth-century in date, this time certainly used as a reliquary, which was excavated from beneath the altar space of a church near Pola in Istria in 1906.⁴² The lid shows Christ handing

the Law to Peter in the presence of Paul, and the front has an image of the Hetoimasia (or empty throne portending the Second Coming) with the Lamb of God beneath it. These two scenes represent the future coming of the Lord and his gift of the Law, making a vigorous pronouncement of divine presence, even if this is intriguingly modulated by the emptiness of the throne. But the sides and back (fig. 1.2) show images of the interiors

⁴¹ On Christian typology, see S. Schrenk, *Typos und Antitypos in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (Münster, 1995); Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 249–87; Tkacz, *Key to the Brescia Casket*, 51–62.

⁴² See, e.g., A. Angiolini, *La capsella eburnea di Pola* (Bologna, 1970); D. Longhi, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher: Iconografia e committenza* (Ravenna, 2006); H. A. Klein in *Treasures of*

of cult buildings with columns and arcades and a central niche that has pilgrims approaching a closed door (on the left and back; the middle portion of the right side is too damaged for certain interpretation). With their firm emphasis on cult and on worshippers of both sexes, including children, approaching closed shrines on the left end and perhaps the right, or standing frontal in the orans posture and apparently kneeling in veneration on the back, this imagery makes a brilliant, sustained, and repeated visual case for the play of closure and ostentation. The pilgrim's desire for penetrating the closed enclave into the inner sanctum represented and occluded by the arcades and closed doors mirrors the box's own play with the desire of anyone who might see it and wish to open it. The imagery implies a hidden and sacred secret and indicates the ways to approach that secret, while the box—used for relics in its final deposition beneath an altar—signals the sacred matter hidden within. The fact that the casket was ultimately itself hidden away (buried for perhaps as much as fifteen centuries before excavation) again emphasizes the way that what mattered most about the expensive materials and exquisite workmanship of such fine reliquaries was their validation and celebration of the infinitely more precious matter which they contained.

Like the Brescia Lipsanotheca, the main scenes of the Pola casket's base are subject to significant framing with four tiers of representation on its base (the upper tier being the lip of the lid). These move from a laurel frieze with a central cross in the lowest tier, via the figural imagery of the second register, to a band with lambs emerging from city ideographs to venerate the cross in the upper tier of the base and then doves flanking the cross on the lip of the lid. Here there is a movement from the martyr's crown implied by the laurel frieze to images of what may well be martyria, adorning a reliquary, which depict both the approach of pilgrims and the denial of a full revelation of the shrine's contents. In the band above, lambs emerge out of the constraints of buildings into a direct confrontation with the cross, while at the top the doves face the cross in the air, free of any material encumbrance or constriction. In both these caskets, three-dimensional framing (in the object as box)

comes—on the level of the flat surface—to play out as two-dimensional framing.⁴³ We shall return to this issue in due course.

The Reliquary Discourse of Byzantine Art

Byzantium was to develop the kinds of visual and three-dimensional discourses implicit in these early Christian objects in spectacular ways. It is difficult to attempt a historical assessment of the development of Byzantine visual practice in these areas before the post-Iconoclastic period, since survivals are so few (both of reliquaries and of icons). But when we look at the rich materials from the ninth century and after, we may say that a very sophisticated visual and material semiotics of the reliquary was developed. This was the case equally with contact relics connected to holy persons (of which the True Cross is the most important example) and with actual body parts from deceased saints—that is, secondary relics whose sanctity derives from a metonymic association with a holy person and primary relics whose holiness results by synecdoche from once being part of that person.⁴⁴ This was no less the case with relics that evoked a sacred world guaranteed by scriptural testimony (especially those of the Holy Land, but to some extent also those associated with Peter and Paul in Rome) and with relics that arose from the specific charisma of a sacred body and a sacred life, attested by biographies, miracle collections, and material-cultural celebration (one thinks of St. Demetrios or Symeon Stylites in the East, and such as Martin of Tours in the West). I will look here at two of the more impressive groups within these categories—some reliquaries of the True Cross and some reliquaries of St. Demetrios of Thessalonike.

⁴³ See J. Elsner, "Framing the Objects We Study: Three Boxes from Late Roman Italy," *JWarb* 71 (2008): 21–38, esp. 31–33 and 36–38, on this issue at greater length. For similar themes in later Byzantium, see G. Peers, *Sacred Shock: Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium* (University Park, PA, 2005), 1–34.

⁴⁴ On the cult of body parts in Byzantium, see Wortley, *Cult of Relics* (n. 25 above), study I. For issues of definition in the case of reliquaries and the problems of anachronism when varieties of modern criteria are brought into play, see chapter 2 by Smith, below.

Let us begin with the True Cross.⁴⁵ It is essential to the design structure of Byzantine pectoral reliquary crosses, decorated on the outside, to open and to reveal a fragment of the True Cross in the interior.⁴⁶ This dynamic of revelation is developed to levels of great subtlety and complexity in the prize masterpieces of this genre. Take for example the exquisite *staurotheke*, or reliquary of the True Cross, made probably at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries in Constantinople and now in the Cathedral Treasury at Monopoli, between Bari and Brindisi in Apulia (fig. 1.3).⁴⁷ It is a small silver-gilt box (about 6.5 cm square with a depth of 1.8 cm) that originally held six gems on the front and had a cross in repoussé on the back. When one pulls open the hinged wings of the cover, a triptych in exquisite enamel appears with an icon of the Crucifixion between the Virgin and St. John in the center and SS. Paul and Peter respectively on the left and right wings (fig. 1.3a). If one slides down the central panel of the Crucifixion, the relic of the True Cross is revealed in the central cavity (fig. 1.3b). Here, at huge expense and in a miniature form less than 6.5 centimeters squared, the sacred is encased in a form that is opulent and at the same time theologically suggestive. The simple monochrome form of the cross on the back gives way to the living, vividly colored icon of the Crucifixion when the container is opened, only for that to give way to the actual relic that

was present on the occasion, the wood to which Our Lord's body was nailed. The recession of seccries—itself figured as a gradation of colors from monochrome to color to that which is beyond color—is within an architectural dispensation of going ever deeper into a hidden interior which takes one ever closer to the living witness of one of the key events of the Passion itself.

This kind of structure can be multiplied in numerous other True Cross reliquaries. Relatively simple types—*enkolpia* and other pectoral crosses—offer an external decorated box for the relic to be held and suspended around the neck. One might cite a series of *enkolpia* with Christ crucified on the obverse and other imagery on the back, such as the large number of bronze examples published by Brigitte Pitarakis in 2006.⁴⁸ Very few such crosses preserve their relics, but an eleventh-century example found during archaeological excavation at the martyrium of St. Philip in Hierapolis in Phrygia, with two saints on the exterior in the orans position (one identified as St. John), still had its bone relics inside.⁴⁹ These kinds of objects are regularly engraved with saints in the orans posture—perhaps marking their role as intercessors in prayer for the cross's owner in relation to the Crucified.⁵⁰ The bone relics in this case give a direct haptic authority to the mediation represented by the saints on the exterior, whose direction to Christ is nicely defined by the specific cross-form of this kind of reliquary. Although in cross shape, this is not a True Cross reliquary; but it does illustrate the simple structural model of this pattern. A more complex and expensive eleventh-century silver example now in the Benaki Museum has Christ Crucified on the front and a standing Virgin between angels on the back executed in niello.⁵¹ Inside was a detachable silver cross, made to fit the space within, and inside this cross was a cross-shaped cavity in which the now-lost original relic of the True Cross would have fitted. This dynamic not only allows a material

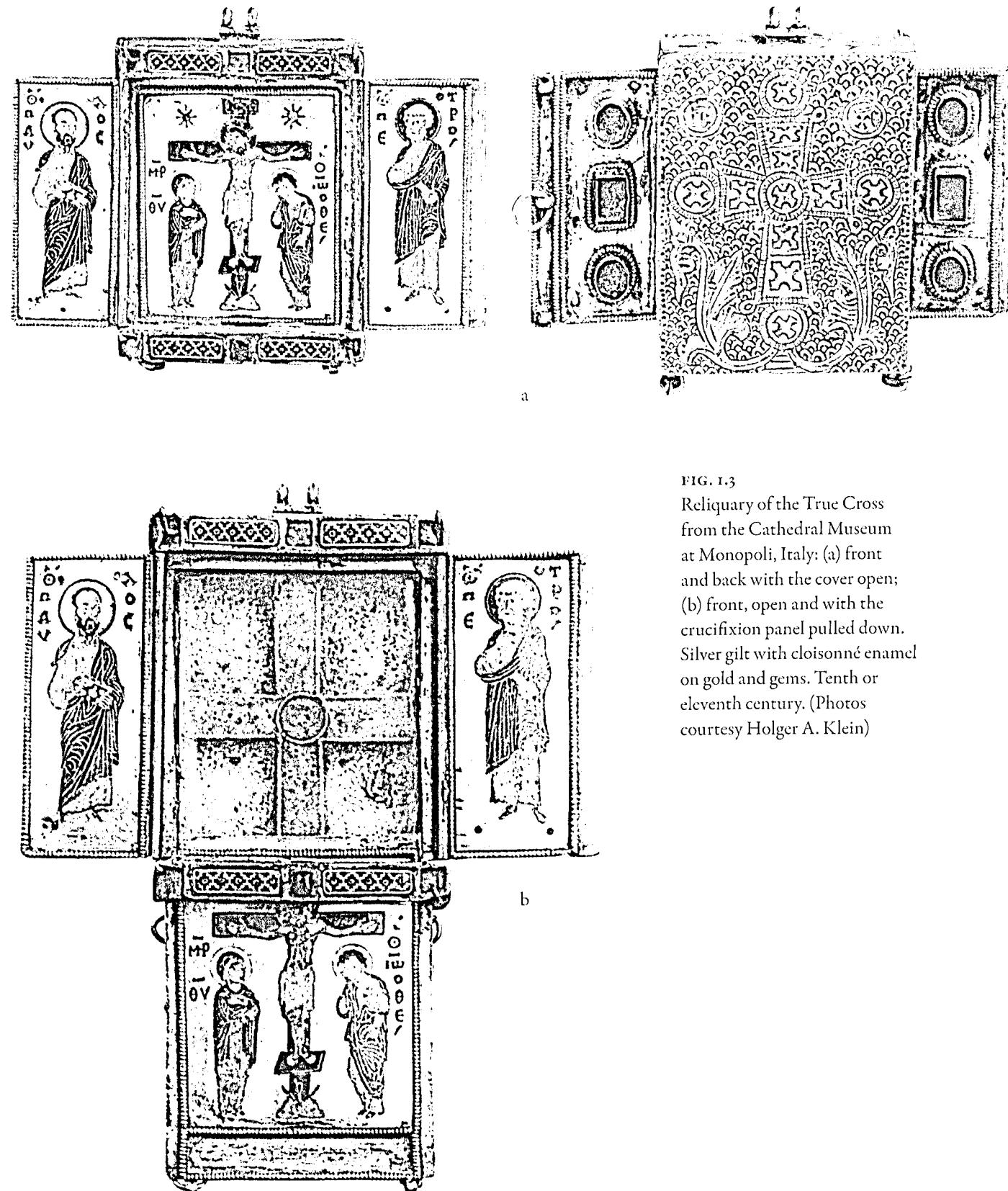


FIG. 1.3
Reliquary of the True Cross from the Cathedral Museum at Monopoli, Italy: (a) front and back with the cover open; (b) front, open and with the crucifixion panel pulled down. Silver gilt with cloisonné enamel on gold and gems. Tenth or eleventh century. (Photos courtesy Holger A. Klein)

⁴⁵ The key works here are A. Frolow, *La relique de la Vraie Croix: Recherches sur le développement d'un culte* (Paris, 1961); idem, *Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix* (Paris, 1965); H. A. Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das "Wahre" Kreuz* (Wiesbaden, 2004); see also Wortley, *Cult of Relics*, study VI.

⁴⁶ See B. Pitarakis, *Les croix-reliquaires pectorals byzantines en bronze* (Paris, 2006) for over 650 examples in the catalogue raisonné (most between roughly the ninth and thirteenth centuries) with pp. 55–108 on iconography and 109–22 on contents. In general the catalogue photographs fail to show interiors of these crosses, but nos. 50, 255, 384, and 514 do seem to preserve some fragments of the relic enclosed; see pp. 117–18.

⁴⁷ For the object, see W. Wixom in *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843–1261*, ed. H. Evans and W. Wixom (New York, 1997), 162–63, no. 110. For the class of objects, see Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das "Wahre" Kreuz*; for detailed discussion of one of the greatest examples, the Limburg Staurotheke, see B. Pentcheva, "Containers of Power: Eunuchs and Reliquaries in Byzantium," *Res* 51 (2007): 108–25; for an interesting historical account of such objects from relic to commodity, see A. Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks* (Chicago, 2006), 9–47.

⁴⁸ See Pitarakis, *Les croix-reliquaires pectorals*.

⁴⁹ See *Hierapolis di Frigia 1957–1987* (Milan, 1987), 131 and Pitarakis, *Les croix-reliquaires pectorals*, 115 and no. 384.

⁵⁰ See Pitarakis, *Les croix-reliquaires pectorals*, 84–87 on the orant iconography and 92–95 on the popularity of St. John, second only to St. George.

⁵¹ D. Katsarilias in Evans and Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium*, 172–73, no. 123.

rhetoric of interiority and revelation as one opens the outer cross, but again raises the possibility for a haptic as well as optic approach of worship in relationship to the relic, once revealed, which can be both seen and touched. It allows the relic to be both intensely personal to the owner or wearer of the cross and to function as a means of special connection and relationship with someone else, should the wearer choose to allow another person to open the cross and to see or touch the relic.

A spectacular example among True Cross reliquaries is the cross made of gold with niello inlay produced probably in Constantinople toward the end of the ninth century, which was found in Bulgaria in 1973 (fig. 1.4).⁵² This consists of three crosses, one inside the next like a nest of Russian dolls, with the outer two made of gold and linked by a pin, and the inner one of wood. The exterior cross, at just over 7 by 4 centimeters, depicts a series of Christological scenes that deliberately exclude reference to the Crucifixion itself—except through the object's form as a cross. On what we may initially call the front (illustrated upside down in fig. 1.4) are images of Jesus's birth, early life, and ministry—the Annunciation, Nativity, Circumcision, Baptism, and Transfiguration in the center. On the back are the key events after his death on the Cross—the Anastasis and the Ascension. The iconography is complex. The front has Christ at the center in a circle, which is both an *imago clipeata* and the mandorla of the Transfiguration. He is at the moment within his earthly life when his full divinity is most definitively revealed, at the heart of a vertical line of themes that include the Holy Spirit—that is, the Annunciation at the top of the Cross and the Baptism at the bottom. An engraved dove, not outlined in niello, hovers between the Transfiguration and Baptism scenes, signifying the Spirit. Yet the three images on the upper wings of the cross—Nativity, Annunciation, and Circumcision—all focus on the Virgin and hence place an Incarnational emphasis on

Jesus's divinity within a human birth. The back picks up this theme by placing the Virgin at the center in the *orans* posture between two trees, flanked by the apostles in the Ascension. Above and below are images of Jesus—raising Adam and Eve in the Anastasis at the bottom and rising to heaven in glory at the Ascension at the top.⁵³

The second cross, also of gold and niello, nesting inside the first, has Christ crucified between Mary and John on the front with an image of Golgotha below and a series of small slits and holes in Jesus's body and in the cross upon which it hangs. On the back is the Virgin with the infant Jesus in the form often called “Nikopoios” surrounded by busts of four theological saints—Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian, Nicholas, and Basil. This second cross has an iconography that stresses both the Crucifixion and the Incarnation (through the figure of the Virgin and Child, picking up the image of the central Virgin on the back of the exterior cross) as well as emphasizing the theological elaboration of that tradition in the church fathers.⁵⁴ Inside this inner cross was a small cross, 3.7 by 2.7 centimeters, made of fragments of wood embedded in a mastic medium, resting within the frame created by the sides attached to the Crucifixion panel of the inner gold cross. This wooden relic of the True Cross, far less valuable in monetary terms than its golden containers and infinitely more precious as a medium of the holy, itself had further relics attached to it, of bone according to the excavators, but it is not impossible these may have been stone fragments from Golgotha.⁵⁵

What is unclear is whether the inner cross originally had a detachable back (as it does now) so that the Virgin panel could be removed to give direct access to the wood of the True Cross, or whether the resin mastic in which the interior

⁵² Clearly many of the resonances are liturgical. See the discussion of this issue by Krueger in chapter 6.

⁵³ For some discussion of the imagery see A. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton, 1986), 95, 98, 193–4.

⁵⁴ See Dontcheva, “Une Croix pectorale-reliquaire en or récemment trouvée à Pliska,” *Cahiers* 25 (1976): 59–66; L. Doncheva-Petkova, “Croix d'or—reliquaire de Pliska,” in *Culture et art en Bulgarie médiévale, VIII–XII^e s.* (= *BIA Bulg* 35), ed. Z. Vúzharova (Sofia, 1979), 74–91; S. Taft in Evans and Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium*, 331–32, no. 225; G. Parpulov in Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, 49, no. 32.

relics were fixed to make up a cross was intended also to stick the back panel to the front and to create a single fused unit of the golden inner cross and its contents. At any rate, solder appears not to have been used to fix the inner cross. If it was a single unit, the inner cross becomes a kind of touch relic in its own right—materially fused with the wood of the True Cross (and whatever other relics are within) and giving direct access to them through the holes of the front. If the back did remain detachable in its original state, then this object—in addition to its dollhouse fascination with the intimacies of ever-receding interiors—plays havoc with our definitions of front and back. If the front and back of the outer cross are defined by the visibility of its hinge when closed, then what is revealed as the front of the second cross when it is opened is the Crucifixion scene. But this must be turned upside down and made into the back for one to pull away the back of the outer cross and reveal the image of the Virgin, which sits as a removable cover over the mastic cross with its embedded relics. The wooden relic can be glimpsed through the holes in the depicted cross and Jesus's body in the crucifixion scene so that representation is eliminated to reveal the real referent of its mimetic imagery, the image of wood giving way not only to real wood but to the very wood on which the depicted event took place. Yet this revelation of the real, behind and beneath mimesis, is still on the optical level of the gaze. The relic itself is fully revealed only when the Virgin panel is removed and the viewer's relationship to the object can move to the haptic level of touching or kissing directly. In the miniature spatial dynamics of the Pliska cross, back and front are themselves reversed and turned upside down as one penetrates to the reality of holy matter that was itself present at the Passion of Jesus, which is the theme of this object's imagery—both through its conspicuous absence from the iconography of the outer cross and its powerful presence on the inner.

In terms of reliquary intercession, the addition of bone relics, if that is what they are, to the wood of the True Cross is striking. The frame's visual rhetoric strongly focuses on the Passion and the Incarnational status of the victim sacrificed upon the cross, and so builds an architecture appropriate to the revelation of the ultimate



FIG. 1.4
Pectoral reliquary Cross, found in excavation in Pliska, Bulgaria, now in Sofia at the National Institute of Archaeology with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Gold and niello. Ninth to tenth century. (Photo courtesy Krassimir Georgiev)

the shrine of St. Demetrios at Thessalonike. A magnificent round pendant-reliquary of small dimensions (2.8 cm in diameter and 0.6 cm in depth) from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, now in Dumbarton Oaks, has enamel images of St. Demetrios in bust form on the front and SS. Sergios and Bakchos standing on the back (figs. 1.5a and b). Encircling the portrait of Demetrios and around the side of this locket is simultaneously a decorative border and an enamel inscription of gold letters. On a blue ground on the front and white letters on a dark blue ground on the side is this text:

The faith of Sergios carries the venerable container with the blood and myron of St. Demetrios. He asks to have you as protector both in life and in death together with the two victorious martyrs.⁵⁶

This locket opens by detaching a screw-pin from above the saints' heads to reveal a plain gold cross, made by beading, set within a square frame (fig. 1.5c). This cross opens—as so many crosses on the fronts of triptychs do—to become two doors. Inside is a cavity with a small gold relief of St. Demetrios lying in his tomb, signified by an arch-shaped vault (fig. 1.5d).⁵⁷ It is possible that relics (for instance, cloth or earth dipped in the myron, miraculously produced at the shrine in Thessalonike, and blood to which the inscription refers) might have been stored in the “tomb space” above the recumbent figure of the saint. Here we have a dynamic of increasing interiority that vicariously imitates a pilgrim’s entry into the very tomb space itself. The commissioner’s identity as suppliant of Demetrios (with Sergios as his name saint) gives way, via the cross that is also a door, to the mimesis of the tomb and hence the vicarious veneration at the site, rendered as a

three-dimensional miniature golden icon of the saint lying as in his coffin.

In a still more magnificent and somewhat earlier, but now fragmented, *enkolpion* reliquary of the same theme (somewhat larger in size at 3.8 cm in diameter and 1.1 cm in depth), bought by the British Museum in 1926, the front enamel (presumably of St. Demetrios) has been lost, but on the back is a bust of St. George in military dress and with a posture similar to the later Demetrios in Dumbarton Oaks.⁵⁸ The image of George has a framing verse inscription in white letters on a blue ground saying, “he supplicates you to be his fervent guardian in battles,” while the sides have a hexameter inscription that states, “being anointed by your blood and your myron.” When the original (no longer existent) front was opened, a rectangular flap with a further enamel icon of the saint is revealed, which depicts St. Demetrios reclining in his tomb beneath an arch or vault, from whose apex hangs a lamp. This flap is raised to the left to show a second image of the reclining Demetrios, this time in repoussé gold and apparently lying inside his sarcophagus.⁵⁹ It looks to me as if we are meant to be gazing down into the coffin with its thick bars framing the upper and lower edges of the space, even though the body of the saint is shown as if we were looking at it from the side. As in the Dumbarton Oaks *enkolpion* reliquary, relics with blood and myron may have been included in the interior cavity with the gold image of the saint (as is implied by the inscription on the side). The relics visible today in the space around the Demetrios cavity were added at a later stage,⁶⁰ when the object was associated with the Georgian martyr Queen Kethevan and her relics of the True Cross.

Both these objects use the material logic of interiority and unveiling for the mimesis of a virtual pilgrimage in which the beholder opens the locket and descends like a pilgrim at

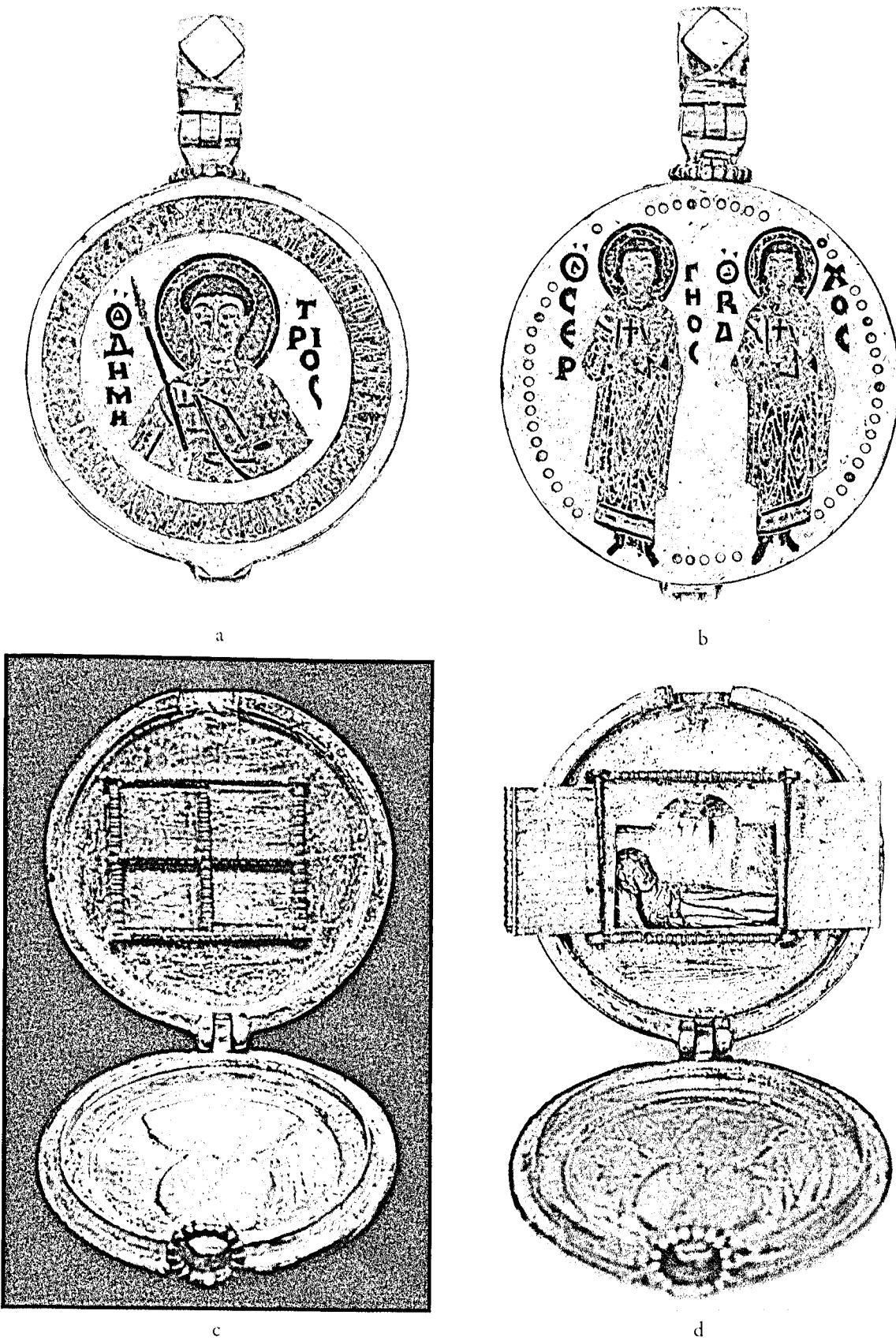


FIG. 1.5
Reliquary-pendant of St. Demetrios from Dumbarton Oaks (BZ 1953.20): (a) front with St Demetrios in enamel; (b) back with SS. Sergios and Bakchos; (c) front with the locket opened and the inner doors closed; (d) front with the inner doors opened, showing St. Demetrios in his tomb beneath an arched vault. Gold and cloisonné enamel, thirteenth to fourteenth century. (Photo courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection)

⁵⁶ See A. Grabar, “Un nouveau reliquaire de saint Démétrios,” *DOP* 8 (1954): 305–13; M. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Medieval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 2, *Jewelry, Enamels and Art of the Migration*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC, 2005), no. 160, p. 111; I. Kalavrezou in Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 117, p. 168; G. Bühl in Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, 46–47, no. 29; Lidov, *Hierotopy* (n. 33 above), 47.

⁵⁷ On the theme of the recumbent St. Demetrios, see A. Grabar, “La théme du ‘gisant’ dans l’art byzantin,” *Cah. Arch.* 29 (1980–81): 143–56, esp. 144–45.

⁵⁸ See O. M. Dalton, “An Enamelled Gold Reliquary,” *BMQ* 1 (1926–7): 33–35; A. Grabar, “Quelques reliquaires de saint Démétrios et le martyrium du saint à Salonique,” *DOP* 5 (1950): 1–28, no. 6, pp. 16–18; D. Buckton in *idem, Byzantium* (London, 1994), 185–86; D. Katsarelis in Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 116, pp. 167–68; K. Gerry in Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, 47, no. 30.

⁵⁹ So Grabar, “Quelques reliquaires de saint Démétrios,” 18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

Thessalonike—via the cross in the Dumbarton Oaks reliquary—to the tomb itself. In the British Museum locket, we go beyond the tomb, with its enameled brightness and lamp, to the gold of the body in its sarcophagus. The “architecture” of these objects constructs a journey, parallel to that of the pilgrim within so many saints’ shrines,⁶¹ to greater interiority. We may say that on the miniature level at which this visual dispensation operates, these reliquaries’ architecture turns the viewer, as he or she proceeds to successive openings, into a pilgrim. Whether these objects’ material logic always worked at the level of imitation (from the icon of the living saint on the front to the icon of the saint in his tomb to the icon of the saint in his coffin), or actually extended to the inclusion of real relics—as in the True Cross reliquaries we looked at earlier and as implied by the inscriptions on both *enkolpia*, which mention relics of blood and myron—must remain moot. But we may say that the loss or absence of actual relics by the time the British Museum object fell into Georgian hands may in part explain its adaptation for the addition of relics at a later stage.

Equally, the mimetic staging by these reliquaries of a process of pilgrimage to a tomb, which insists visually on the body of the saint, is particularly charged in the case of St. Demetrios. For there is significant doubt as to whether any body or relics were ever in the cult site at Thessalonike and whether the silver hexagonal ciborium (much represented in mosaics within the church but no longer surviving), which was venerated as the saint’s final resting place and beneath which his body was said to lie, was ever in fact a tomb.⁶² In a sense the visual emphasis on the dead saint in the Demetrios reliquary tradition is a response to his absence at the cult center, but nonetheless also to his miracle-working and relic-producing presence.

A number of rather larger Demetrios reliquaries certainly contain cavities for relics of myron and blood. In particular the Treasury of the Cathedral at Halberstadt contains a group of three Demetrios reliquaries, which appear to

⁶¹ Ibid., 18 specifically mentions the Holy Sepulchre, but the pattern is much more widespread.

⁶² See R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons* (London, 1985), 51–94, esp. 63.

have been booty brought by Bishop Conrad (who reigned between 1201 and 1208) from the sack of Constantinople in 1204 and his subsequent trip to the Holy Land.⁶³ The earliest is a magnificent tenth-century oblong silver-gilt box with a cloisonné enamel lid, measuring 4.5 by 3.2 by 1.5 centimeters (excluding the suspension ring).⁶⁴ The lid has an enamel icon of St. Demetrios standing in a gesture of prayer or blessing and holding a small cross. On the back is the image of St. Nestorios—Demetrios’s companion and co-martyr—in repoussé and in the same posture as Demetrios. When the enamel lid is swung open to the right, there are a series of undecorated doors—a pair on top and a single door below. These open to reveal a three-dimensional bust probably of St. Demetrios with hands crossed at his breast and beneath an arch, at the top,⁶⁵ and a cavity for the relics of myron and blood, which in this case remain in place, beneath. Here there is a double movement of veneration from the two saints of the exterior—one in full color and one in repoussé—to the interior symbolic configuration of the saint in his tomb (this time displayed frontally) and his actual relics: the two-dimensional icons of the exterior are fulfilled in a three-dimensional interior bust icon, and the optic regime of the exterior transforms to the haptic model of the inside.

A second oblong silver-gilt reliquary in Halberstadt, probably twelfth-century, about 10

⁶³ On Conrad, see A. Andrea, “Conrad of Krosigk, Bishop of Halberstadt, Crusader and Monk of Sitzenbach: His Ecclesiastical Career, 1184–1225,” *AC* 43 (1987): 11–91, esp. 63–69 on his collection of relics. In addition to the three at Halberstadt in this class of objects, two further examples survive at Athos in the Monastery of Vatopedi and in the Lavra; see K. Loverdou-Tsigarida, “Thessalonique, centre de production d’objets d’arts au XIV^e siècle,” *DOP* 57 (2003): 242–54, esp. 244–45.

⁶⁴ This is Halberstadt, no. 16a. See Grabar, “Quelques reliquaires de saint Démétrios,” no. 2, p. 6; J. Flemming, E. Lehmann, and E. Schubert, *Dom und Domschatz zu Halberstadt* (Vienna, 1974), 245–46; W. Wixom in Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 108, pp. 161–62; P. Janke in H. Meller, I. Mundt, and B. Schmuhl, eds., *Der heilige Schatz im Dom zu Halberstadt* (Regensburg, 2008), 54–55; and P. Chatterjee, *The Living Icon in Byzantium and Italy* (Cambridge, 2014), 44–47.

⁶⁵ The literature reports the saint in the interior cavity to be Nestorios (who was indeed buried with Demetrios), but that would make this example—admittedly the earliest—the only one in which the interior figure was not Demetrios. An inscription would clarify, but on the admittedly inadequate published photographs I can find nothing.

by 6 by 3 centimeters (fig. 1.6),⁶⁶ has a lid in the form of a detachable relief-icon of St. Demetrios, standing in the orans posture (as he was certainly represented in the mosaics of the church at Thessalonike standing before his ciborium, perhaps in imitation of an icon in the orans posture inside or in front of the ciborium, fig. 1.6a)⁶⁷ and a repoussé cross on the base (fig. 1.6b).⁶⁸ The sides have a niello inscription affirming the contents as not only the blood but also the myron of the martyr Demetrios. When the lid is removed, two sets of closed double-doors appear (of which one at the bottom has now been lost, fig. 1.6c). Like so many triptychs, these have images of standing saints—Nestorios and Lopus, the companions of Demetrios, at the top and Kosmas (now missing) and Damian, who had a cult in the Church of St. Demetrios at Thessalonike,⁶⁹ below. When these doors are opened, Demetrios with his arms crossed and eyes closed in death appears in three-dimensional bust form at the top, and a cavity for the relics below (fig. 1.6d). Here the promise of relics in the inscription on the side and the icon of Demetrios on the lid gives way to an iconic configuration of the other key saints at the cult-center in Thessalonike, the healing pair of Kosmas and Damian, and Demetrios’s saintly companions. These images are at once icons in their own right, figuring specific saints, and making a strong locational gesture to the church at Thessalonike and its cult. That cult—especially the production of myrrh-scented oil at the tomb—is then directly

⁶⁶ These are the dimensions in Flemming, Lehmann, and Schubert, *Dom und Domschatz zu Halberstadt*, 246–47 and Janke in Meller, Mundt, and Schmuhl, *Der heilige Schatz*, 54. Grabar gives much smaller dimensions which look wrong to me, but I have only seen photographs.

⁶⁷ The watercolor reproductions of the now-lost mosaics from the arcade of the north wall show the saint in the orans position on four occasions (in spandrels A, B, F, and H), on which see R. Cormack, “The Mosaic Decoration of S. Demetrios, Thessaloniki: A Re-examination in the Light of the Drawings by W. S. George,” *BSA* 64 (1969): 17–52, esp. 24–26, 35, 37, and one original mosaic from the south arcade, on which see Cormack, *Writing in Gold*, 80–83.

⁶⁸ This is Halberstadt, no. 24. For some, incomplete, discussion, see Grabar, “Quelques reliquaires de saint Démétrios,” no. 3, p. 6; Flemming, Lehmann, and Schubert, *Dom und Domschatz zu Halberstadt*, 246–47, and P. Janke in Meller, Mundt, and Schmuhl, *Der heilige Schatz*, 54–59.

⁶⁹ See K. Loverdou-Tsigarida in *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi* (Athens, 1998), 654, n. 94.

figured by the relics themselves and the image of the dead St. Demetrios.

A magnificent twelfth-century reliquary, 11.7 by 6.5 by 6.5 centimeters, closely connected to the previous one, is now in the monastic treasury of Vatopedi on Mt Athos.⁷⁰ The detachable lid, very similar to that at Halberstadt, has the saint standing in the orans posture—simultaneously venerating and inviting veneration. This time, the sides and base of the casket show scenes of the life of the saint, as if the entire item were a biographical icon with narrative scenes framing the central image, in this case the standing or reclining saint on the lid. Starting chronologically on the long side to the left of the saint from his head, the images show Demetrios in prison, the saint killing the scorpion, the meeting of Demetrios and Nestorios (in the small side beneath the feet of the lid image), Nestorios killing Lyaeos and the martyrdom of Nestorios (on the long side to the right of the lid image, reading from its feet to its halo), and then two miracles of St. Demetrios—the healing of the prefect Marianos (an image which also appeared in mosaic on the west front of the church of St. Demetrios in Thessalonike)⁷¹ at the small side with the ring holder above the lid image’s head, and an impressive image of Demetrios saving Thessalonike from the Slavs on the base. When the lid is lifted, the configuration is the same as in the Halberstadt reliquary (fig. 1.6)—two square panels, each with two standing saints, which are also the outer faces of two sets of double doors. In this case Kosmas and Lopus are on top and Nestorios and Damian below, but it is likely that these have been moved about after the object arrived in Athos and were originally Nestorios and Lopus on top and Kosmas and Damian below.⁷² Both panels open in each square (again as on the outer wings of many a triptych) to reveal at the top the silver gilt repoussé bust-length icon of St. Demetrios with eyes closed and hands crossed at the breast, as if in his tomb, and, below, a cavity

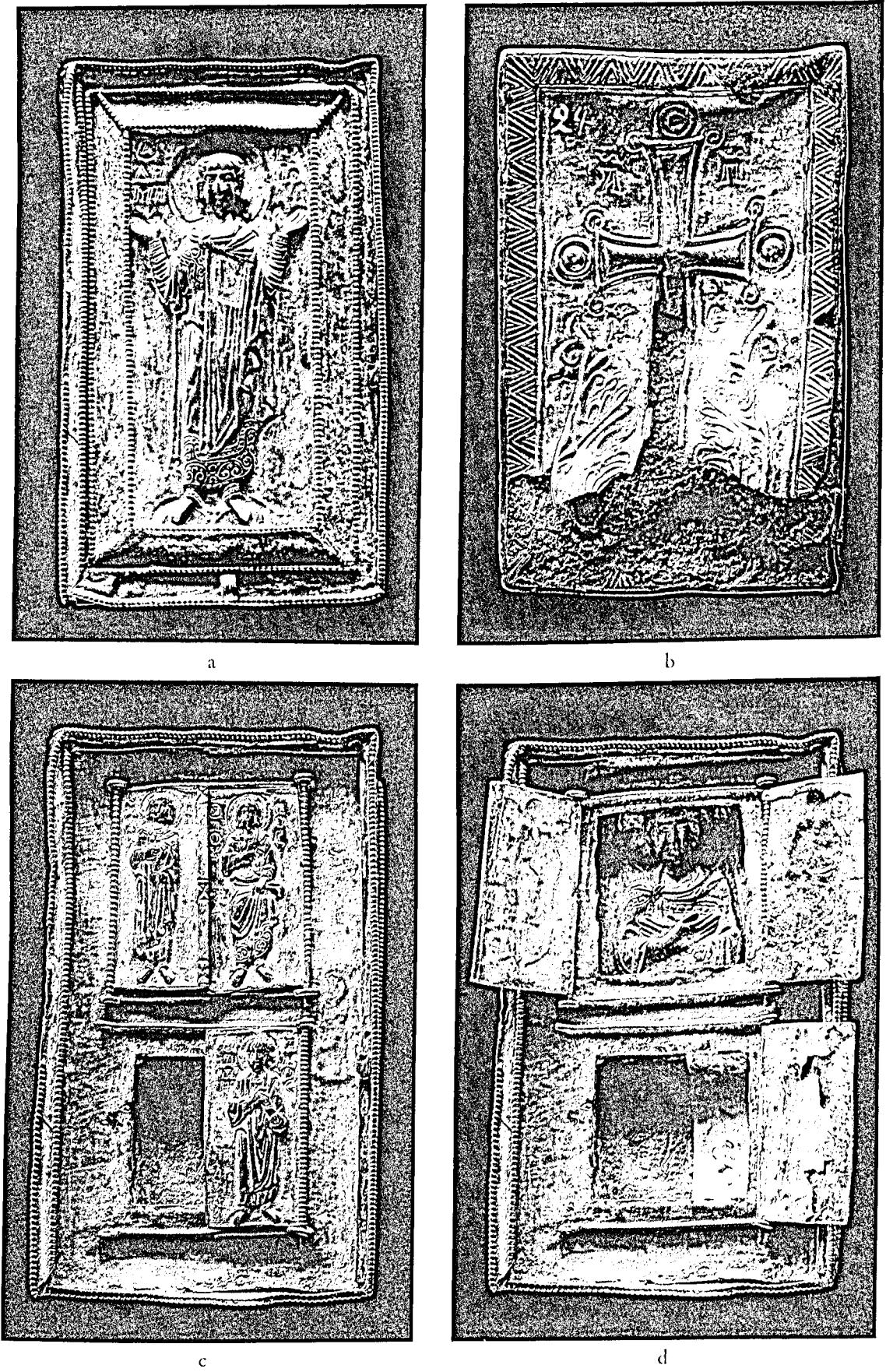
⁷⁰ See Grabar, “Quelques reliquaires de saint Démétrios,” no. 1, pp. 3–5 with earlier bibliography, and Loverdou-Tsigarida in *Vatopaidi*, 470–75.

⁷¹ See Cormack, *Writing in Gold*, 62–63, 76, 79.

⁷² See Loverdou-Tsigarida in *Vatopaidi*, 654, n. 93. She suggests Kosmas and Damian on top and Nestorios and Lopus below, but the analogy of Halberstadt is surely telling, and arguably the two healing saints go with the relic itself.

FIG. 1.6

Reliquary of St. Demetrios from the Cathedral Treasury at Halberstadt, no. 24:
 (a) front cover with the saint in the orans posture;
 (b) back with repoussé cross;
 (c) front with lid removed and the internal doors closed; the saints represented are Nestorios and Lopus on top, Kosmas (missing) and Damian below; (d) front with the doors open, showing the bust of St Demetrios with eyes closed and hands cross in the upper cavity and the cavity for relics (no longer surviving) along with a label. Silver gilt. Twelfth century. (Photos courtesy Juraj Lipták, by permission of the Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt)



for the inclusion of relics of blood and scented oil. In this case the worshipper/viewer penetrates through the narrative of Demetrios's deeds as Christian hero on the exterior to the high relief of his icon on the lid, in a form that may mimic the appearance of his sarcophagus,⁷³ to images of the four other saints whose cults characterize the sacred setting of the center at Thessalonike. These open in turn to reveal the saint in his coffin and the miraculous relics produced by him in that condition. The movement is in part temporal: from the living St. Demetrios on the lid (surrounded by his actions and miracles in life) to the dead but still miraculously active St. Demetrios in the present day and the relics specifically associated with his body and still being produced in the present of the casket's making in the lower cavity.

The Demetrios reliquaries—in a sense more architectural than those of the True Cross since they mimic the pilgrim's movement through, and process of entry into, real sacred space—offer relics which are simultaneously metonymic (material such as cloth or earth that touched the saint's body or tomb) and synecdochic (in that they are immersed in the oil and blood which St. Demetrios's body miraculously produced). The repeated use of inscriptions (on both lockets and the enamel reliquary from Hallberstadt) to announce the nature of the relics is striking, as is their potential absence from the two lockets, which have no specifically constructed cavity for their preservation, unless it be the space with the inner reclining icon of the recumbent saint. One of the interesting aspects of the kinds of framing and narratives of increasing interiority on display in these objects is that they appear to use different discourses for mapping progression into the inner core quite interchangeably within the overarching architectural model of concealment, opening, penetration, and display. In addition to the two relic-related movements from iconic representation to the sacred object (metonymy for touch relics and synecdoche for actual pieces of bone, hair, or skin), there are entirely representational movements from two-dimensional to three-dimensional images, from monochrome to polychrome, but

also from polychrome to pure golden images, and also to ever more miniature images.

This model of the reliquary is intrinsically architectural since it both contains objects and is itself contained within a wider sacred space. The spatial framing of holy objects within a church is a larger-scale version of the Russian-dolls pattern observable in the Pliska cross. In the Holy Land, where the sacred relics are less the bones of saints than specific spots in the landscape that witnessed scriptural action, the model of framing a sacred site—the Holy Sepulchre, the rock of Golgotha, the rock of the Ascension, Mary's tomb, the Cave of the Nativity, and so forth—within a larger reliquary structure (what we might call a form of microarchitecture) such as an aedicule, that is itself enclosed in the bigger sacred space of a church—is normal. And the descent within such an aedicule to an ever more sacred spot—where Jesus was born or rose from the dead, or Mary was buried, for instance—is itself a large-scale version of the pattern that the Demetrios reliquaries mimic with such panache in miniature form. Of course in what we can observe in the present day, with more than a millennium and a half's accretions, these spaces are radically different from how they appeared in early Christian or medieval times—but their modern forms rest on extremely ancient precedents.⁷⁴ Moreover, in ancient Christianity but also in many Holy Land sites in their modern guise, around Galilee for instance, the church building is itself set within a *temenos*—an enclosed garden, or through the multiple thresholds of an atrium and narthex.

The Sacred Interiority of the Icon

The Brescia Casket (fig. 1.1) performs its role of sacred framing in the two dimensions of placing New Testament scenes within Old Testament prototypes, as well as in the three dimensions of a box. Likewise the Pola Casket (fig. 1.2) not only thematizes the movement to more sacred interiority within its imagery and performs this through the discourse of two-dimensional framing on the images of its base, but also encloses its relics

⁷³ As suggested by Loverdou-Tsigarida in *L'atopadi*, 472–73, although I am skeptical.

⁷⁴ On the phenomenon, see A. Grabar, *Martyrium: Recherches sur le culte des reliques et de l'art chrétien antique* (Paris, 1946) and J. Lassus, *Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie* (Paris, 1947).

three-dimensionally in its interior. In both these early Christian objects the reliquary model of sacred and secret enclosure operates in the realm of the flat surface as well as the architectural relic container. I shall argue now that this model of framing a sacred enclosure is fundamental to the discourse of the flat icon in Byzantium in the era after iconoclasm, drawing on and reinventing in visual form the dynamics of the reliquary.⁷⁵

Triptychs executed in numerous media, from ivory via painted wood to enamel, are objects designed to stress their central inner panel through both the panels on the sides and the fact that these can be opened or closed. The closed wings—sometimes with elaborate decoration and sometimes within simple crosses—invite the act of opening and in so doing register the message of a greater secret hidden within, and function as an elevating device for the sanctity of the image concealed inside. Opening becomes both a theatrical act and an invitation to epiphany, a gesture of veneration and a potent symbol of the movement in prayer to deeper interiority. In such pieces as the relatively small tenth-century ivory triptych now at the Walters Art Museum (roughly 12 cm square when closed, although this piece has been somewhat cut down at some later stage), the back is entirely unadorned (fig. 1.7a). On the front, the plain crosses of the exterior (fig. 1.7b) yield to subsidiary images of unidentified saints on the inside faces of the open wings—two full size and two in bust-form above them (fig. 1.7c).⁷⁶ These orchestrate a build-up to the great image of the Hodegetria and Christ Child in the central panel framed, unlike the saints, in an elaborate niche of strigillated columns and acanthus canopy, suggesting both further spatial recession and the Virgin's emergence from that space in a kind of countermovement that responds to the beholder's opening of the triptych. Her right side is already in front of the frame that holds her, although her halo and Christ are still within the imaginary

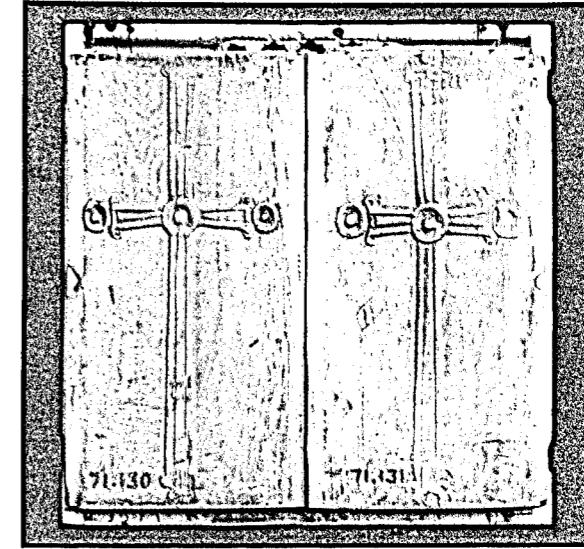
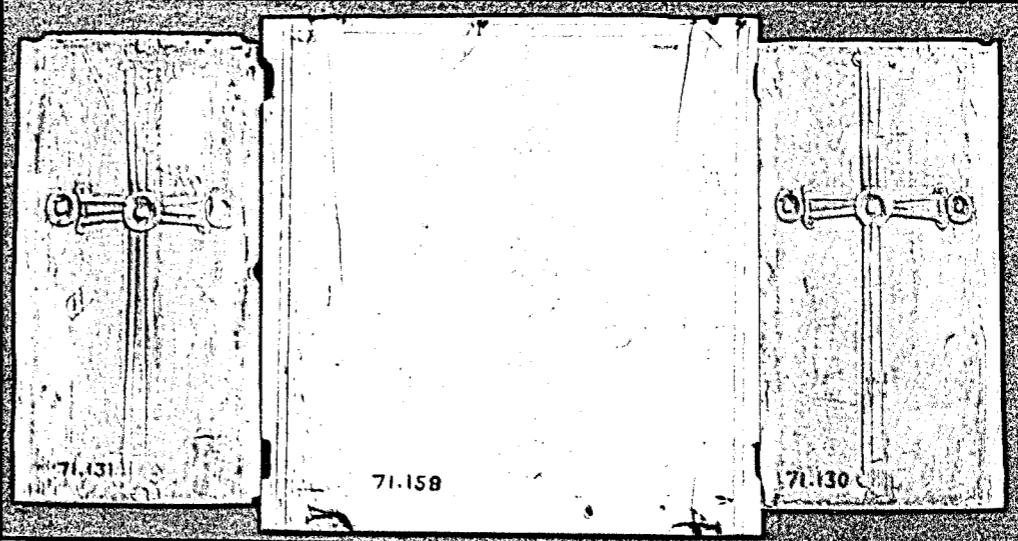
space of the frame—as if she were in the very process of coming out. The movement from crosses on the exterior of the wings via saints to Virgin and Child is simultaneously one of increasing realism—from the form of wood to that of the living Theotokos—and of recession into ever-deeper interior space, with the architectural imagery of the frame effectively echoing in two dimensions the interiority enacted through three dimensions by the act of opening the closed triptych.

The form of such objects only encourages elaboration when expense and grandeur are not at issue. The spectacular Harbaville triptych of the mid-tenth century, now in the Louvre, which measures just under 2.4 by 1.4 centimeters when closed,⁷⁷ has an elaborate cross within an exquisitely carved natural landscape of animals, trees, and stars on the back.⁷⁸ Its wings, when closed to form the front, offer three rows of saints, the upper and lower ones full bodied and the central band in medallions, all identified by inscriptions. When opened, more saints in the same formations line the wings, with military saints in the upper zone. In the center, to the top, Christ is enthroned between busts of angels in medallions, John the Baptist and the Virgin—a classic deesis which includes here both the full bodied and the circular bust models of representing the saints from the rest of the triptych. Beneath is St. Peter flanked by James and John the Theologian to the left and Paul with Andrew on the right. Unlike the saints on the exterior, all the figures of the center (who are uniformly scriptural) and also those in the lower band of the wings stand on bases or footstools. The very form of ivory—cutting back the material from the front—gives the images on the inside a quality of emerging from the background, something enhanced by the elaborate frame at the top, bottom, and middle of the triptych's central scene.

⁷⁵ This is a different kind of comparison of relic and icon from those traditional in the field—e.g., Wortley, *Cult of Relics* (n. 25 above), study VIII. For some thoughts on icons and framing in the (later) Russian tradition, see P. Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich* (London, 2011), 27–36, 46–70.

⁷⁶ See A. Cutler, *The Hand of the Master* (Princeton, 1994), 88–89 and J. Hanson in *Mother of God*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Athens, 2000), 398–99, no. 59.

FIG. 1.7
Triptych icon of the Virgin and Child with Saints, now in the Walters Art Museum. Ivory. Tenth century.
(a) Back, open, no decoration except for an incised rim around the perimeter, which is not present at the bottom, indicating the object was cut down at some stage; incised crosses on the wings; (b) front, closed, with incised crosses; (c) front, open, with Virgin and Child in the center and saints in the wings.
(Photos courtesy The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore)



b

c

Relatively fewer painted triptychs survive from the Byzantine middle ages than from the same period in the West, largely, one suspects, because the panels were often subsequently separated and venerated individually.⁷⁹ But in the early and middle period of Byzantium the two wings, each approximately half the size of the central image, appear to have opened at the same time, like the ivory examples just discussed, to reveal the main focus of veneration at the heart of the visual and architectural structure. The famous tenth-century panels from Sinai that include the image of King Abgar with the Mandylion were certainly once wings of a triptych that folded in this way and formed a single cross on the front when they were closed.⁸⁰ In late Byzantium and after the fall of Constantinople, this dynamic shifted to a model where the wings are the entire size of the central panel and open in a slower process of unpacking. A late fifteenth-century Cretan example in London has a cross on a stepped plinth with scrolls of vegetation on the exterior.⁸¹ This opens to become the right wing of what initially appears to be a diptych with two anonymous western deacons (identified as SS. Lawrence and Stephen) on the right (on the inside face of the panel with the cross) and St. George in Byzantine military garb on the left. This opening—combining military and ecclesiastical saints, saints of the East and the West—alludes to the union of the churches in 1439. If the St. George panel is opened, a full triptych is now revealed with the Madonna and Child in the center, the embrace of SS. Peter and

Paul (on the inside face of the George panel)—a powerful affirmation of the union of churches—to the left and the two deacons on the right. Here the architectural logic of secrecy and unveiling which is central to the Byzantine icon has been marshaled to a western-influenced Cretan cultural argument.

Arguably the most powerful form of this kind of containment in Byzantine art is books. Lavish composite icons in gold, silver, ivory, and enamel effectively form the front and back of sacred scripture, like the outer covers of a diptych or the box of a reliquary.⁸² Within is the long stack of written parchment, bound as a codex and in the case of illuminated manuscripts interspersed with miniatures hidden until their revelation as the pages are turned to be read. Image contains text (that is, covers hold the codex) but text frames images (whether these are initials, full- or half-page miniatures, marginalia, or frontispieces).

This movement to ever more sacred interiors is quintessentially architectural, in that it uses material form not only to enclose, frame, and define space but also to create a dynamic hierarchy of ever more secret and significant space. In three dimensions it is the fundamental structuring device of the interior of the middle Byzantine church, where the screen of icons across the iconostasis yields—often via doors that resemble the closed outer wings of a triptych or through a curtain—the glimpse of a more interior, secret and sacred space to which only priests have access where the mystery of Eucharistic consecration is performed. A number of impressive early sanctuary doors survive at Sinai, conventionally dated from the twelfth century onward.⁸³ The opening

⁷⁹ For some discussion, see K. Weitzmann, *Studies in the Arts of Sinai* (Princeton, 1982), 211–44.

⁸⁰ See, e.g., A. Labatt in *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, ed. R. Nelson and K. Collins (Los Angeles, 2006), no. 6.

For discussion of the lost central image—thought to have been a Mandylion—see H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago, 1994), 210–12; G. Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance* (Munich, 2002), 34–37; A. Lidov, “Il Dittico del Sinai e il Mandylion,” in *Mandylion: Intorno al ‘Sacro Volto’ da Bisanzio al Genova*, ed. G. Wolf, C. Bozzo, and A. Masetti (Genoa, 2004), 81–86, and G. Wolf, “Il volto che viaggia: Premessa a un incontro,” in Wolf, Bozzo, and Masetti, *Mandylion: Intorno al ‘Sacro Volto’*, 7–24, esp. 20–24.

⁸¹ See M. Georgopoulou in *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, ed. H. Evans (New York, 2004), no. 94, pp. 172–73. For the form of this kind of triptych, see also the great El Greco example in Modena with Nelson and Collins, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, no. 61.

⁸² A truly spectacular example is the late tenth- or early eleventh-century enamel book cover with Christ and the Virgin now in Venice (see I. Kalavrezou in Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 41, p. 88, and A. Eastmond in Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, no. 82, p. 402). For other instances see Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, nos. 156–58; K. Doyle in Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, no. 260, p. 446; A. Eastmond in Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, nos. 390–91, p. 454.

⁸³ For instance Nelson and Collins, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, nos. 22 (Annunciation) and 23 (Moses and Aaron—a theme highly relevant to Sinai), pp. 178–81; Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, no. 322, p. 374 and 461 (Annunciation). For a fourteenth-century Serbian example, see Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, no. 281, and for fifteenth-century examples, see Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, nos. 13, p. 153, with bibliography.

of these doors, leading ultimately to the epiphany of the bread that is the body of the Son, is theologically charged in relation to their visual decoration. In cases where the doors show Old Testament prophets, their visions (highly relevant to the Old Testament Moses narratives of Sinai) give way to the full vision of the incarnate Christ as Eucharistic bread. When the doors show the image of the Annunciation—with Gabriel to the left and the Virgin to the right—then their opening and the appearance of the Host is an enactment of Christ’s birth and epiphany as well as of the Last Supper’s Eucharistic prefiguring of the Passion. The Host is the fulfillment of the promise of the Annunciation on the doors as well as a liturgical development of the scriptural narrative from the Annunciation to both the Nativity and the Passion.

When this theme—with all its complex liturgical and narrative theatricality within the three dimensions and architectural dispensation of a church interior—is transferred to the flat, two-dimensional surface of an icon, a series of exceptionally subtle movements from material to immaterial, from embodied to potential, from exterior to interior become possible. In two double-sided processional icons from Ohrid in Macedonia with the Annunciation on one side and the Hodegetria on the other it has become normal to regard the side with the Virgin and Child as the front (fig. 1.8a).⁸⁴ It seems to me that this misconceives of the architectural dispensation we have been discussing. The Annunciation scene (fig. 1.8b)—which in both cases has no revetment and is thus simpler in its texture and framing than the Virgin and Child—is both the narrative and the theological prequel to the Hodegetria, where the Incarnation is not only fully present in the Theotokos and her son but deliberately alluded to in the Virgin’s gesture of pointing. The play of front and back is not a

matter of more and less important but of the simultaneous theological and liturgical theatricality created by the architectural dispensation we have been examining in terms of triptychs and iconostasis doors. In these icons architecture has been entirely flattened onto a two-dimensional surface, but the necessity for those two dimensions to manifest in three dimensions is brilliantly enacted by the two-sided pictorial form, where either the image or the viewer must travel in space to experience the icon’s full effect. With other themes on the two sides (the Virgin and the Crucifixion, the Virgin and the Man of Sorrows for example), this double-sided form of the icon of course offered numerous further theological possibilities in the narrative play of foreshadowing and looking back, of different emotional registers within the liturgical drama and so forth.⁸⁵

Two great twelfth-century single-sided icons of the Annunciation show the angel and the Virgin arranged in the same configuration as on sanctuary doors, but with the Christ Child inscribed as a ghostly image over the Virgin’s breast.⁸⁶ The wonderful Ustyug Annunciation from Novgorod now in Moscow (fig. 1.9)—the simpler of the two—has the Christ Child painted in red in a posture that emulates the small image of God the Father seated at the upper center. Here the image is stripped of all extrinsic detail, and focuses on just the principal protagonists and the child image which represents in visual form what the angel is announcing and what all he says portends, as well as being the goal of all devotion paid either to the angel (who addresses the Virgin) or to the Mother of God herself. The great Sinai version of the theme moves from the living natural world of the base via the architectural grandiloquence of the throne on which Mary sits (with its curtained edifice behind) to the interiority of the grisaille mandorla and Christ Child painted over her breast.⁸⁷ Nature—especially in the form of birds—appears

⁸⁵ Some impressive instances: the twelfth-century Kastoria icon of the Hodegetria and the Man of Sorrows, see A. Stratigaki in Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, no. 246, p. 442; the late thirteenth-century Ochrid Hodegetria and Crucifixion, see B. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park, PA, 2006), 114–19.

⁸⁶ E.g., Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, 153–54.

⁸⁷ E.g., Nelson and Collins, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, no. 13, p. 153, with bibliography.



a



b

FIG. 1.8
Two-sided icon, perhaps from Constantinople, egg tempera and gold on wood, 93 x 68 cm, early fourteenth century. Icon Gallery, Ohrid, Macedonia.
(a) Virgin Psychosostria, looking out at the viewer and pointing to the Christ Child, with silver-gilt revetment and enamel.
(b) Annunciation. (Photos courtesy Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY)

repeatedly: at the base, in the roof garden of the house behind the Virgin's throne (or is it meant to depict a mural work of art?), in the nesting birds on the roof, and in the dove representing the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on the external world is in contrast to the gold, which defines not only the background of most of the image but also its architecture and Gabriel's draperies. Yet the emphasis on interiority and penetrating into secret space is not given just through the faint image of the Christ Child but also through the curtain drawn back in the house behind the Virgin.

The two examples with revetment from Ohrid, both showing the Virgin and Child, point to a further architectural means of framing the sacred when cast in the classic icon's form of a flat surface (see fig. 1.8a). I mean by this the spectacular and complex play of framing the central sacred image—the image at which veneration is to be directed—within a dispensation of further images, often in different media, to

enhance its sanctity and visual significance. In both these cases, the silver-gilt revetment builds a tactile architectural frame around the central sacred image of Virgin and Child—a frame that not only includes inscriptional injunctions to the viewer (notably in the definition of what is perhaps the earlier of the two panels as the Virgin Psychosostria, "Savior of Souls") but also marginal images of Christ and a variety of prophets and saints. The painted part of the panel—that is, its sacred figures and the objects of principal veneration—is set back from the metal frame, yet it is also cast in vivid and lifelike color by contrast with the metallic ground of the revetment.⁸⁸ Its

⁸⁸ For the role of color in making Byzantine art lifelike see James, *Light and Colour* (n. 33 above), 128–38; on the specific light effects of metallic grounds, see R. Frances, "When All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter: On the Strange History of Looking at Byzantine Art," in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium*, ed. A. Eastmond and L. James (Aldershot, 2003), 13–24, and B. Pentcheva, "Epigrams on Icons," in *Art and Text*

realism as iconic representation is set against the decorative ornamental visual discourse of the metal frame, which has rightly been compared with the lush gardens that imply the natural and perhaps also paradise, such as that on the back of the Harbaville triptych.⁸⁹ There are numerous spectacular examples of the uses of revetment, in conjunction with enamels, especially in icons of the Palaiologan period in which the various figural images of saints and prophets or scenes from scripture such as liturgical feast cycles perform different kinds of theological settings and contexts around the main figures of the icon.⁹⁰

The framing procedures of the icon, however, extend well beyond the uses of revetments for painted, mosaic, or steatite images to the employment of all kinds of gesso, glass, and stucco framing imagery (for instance in a beautiful fourteenth-century Virgin Eleousa now in Athens),⁹¹ the use of painted icons to frame mosaic icons (for instance in an exquisite fourteenth-century Constantinopolitan example whose perhaps Russian frame includes relics as well as painted icons),⁹² the framing of icons, patens and chalices made of rare stones or precious gems with enameled or jeweled incrustations.⁹³ The logic of framing one kind of material with another allows the joining of objects of very different date and

in *Byzantine Culture*, ed. L. James (Cambridge, 2007), 120–38, esp. 129–34 in relation to icon revetment.

⁸⁹ Pentcheva, "Epigrams on Icons," 129–30, specifically citing the Ohrid Psychosostria.

⁹⁰ For discussion of reveted icons, see esp. A. Grabar, *Les revêtements en or et en argent des icônes byzantines du moyen âge* (Venice, 1975) and J. Durand, "Precious-Metal Icon Revetments," in Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 2:43–57. Grabar's emphasis on revetment as primarily a form of offering (4–6) is not incompatible with the formal and "architectural" issues of framing and their suggestive theological implications I am discussing here.

⁹¹ See M. Vassilaki in eadem, *Mother of God*, no. 73, p. 448 and Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, no. 305, pp. 502–3.

⁹² See Y. Piatnitsky in Evans *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 1:34, nos. 225–27, cf. the Demetrios in a painted wooden frame from Sinai with S. Boyd in Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, no. 206, pp. 347–8.

⁹³ For instance the lapis lazuli double-sided icon of Christ and the Virgin in the Louvre, with J. Durand in Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, no. 200, p. 430, or the tenth- to eleventh-century alabaster paten and sardonyx chalice now in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice with M. Da Villa Urbani in Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium 330–1453*, nos. 80–81, pp. 401–2.



FIG. 1.9
Icon of the Annunciation, known as the Ustyug Annunciation, showing the Christ Child on the Virgin's breast and God the Father in the upper center. Probably from Novgorod in Russia, egg tempera on wood, 238 cm x 168 cm, twelfth century. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. (photo courtesy Scala / Art Resource, NY)

⁹⁴ On sensual effects, see L. James, "Sense and Sensibility in Byzantium," *AH* 27 (2004): 523–37, and B. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park, PA, 2010). On mixed media, see, e.g., eadem, "Moving Eyes: Surface and Shadow in the Byzantine Mixed-Media Relief Icon," *Res* 55–56 (2009): 222–34.

But similar effects are engineered through the use of frames of the same material. In the class of so-called biographical icons, small narrative scenes of the saint's life come to construct the main image's frame.⁹⁵ They give specificity and meaning to the main figure, but also define its iconic and non-narrative sanctity by contrast with the busyness of their narrative action. Further and different examples of such framing include those icons where the central figure of veneration is surrounded by smaller images of saints and prophets,⁹⁶ the use of texts to frame images,⁹⁷ or—in the cases where a saint or Christ carries a clearly legible text—we may ask if the icon is not a visual frame for what is written on the book or scroll.⁹⁸ In all these cases the frame is not only a container for the central image—a formal marker of its significance and sanctity—but also offers a potential commentary, a special context, a local or theological edge that differentiates any given image from all the others. Take the great Sinai icon of about 1100 showing the Virgin enthroned, in an early example of the Kykkotissa posture, within an archway with a text from Romanos the Melodist forming the

ground-line beneath her (fig. 1.10).⁹⁹ A wealth of saints, prophets, and texts surround her to create a vibrant visual and theological contextualization capable of great exegetic variety. The frame is both subsidiary to the Virgin—whose size and isolation from its miniature complexities allows her to be separate from it—and also central to the range of meanings and intimations which her icon bears: it comes both to proclaim her significance and to pose the range of theological problems which it is her sacred nature to resolve.

Again, the inspirations for this structure of representational thinking within the icon are architectural. One thinks immediately of the apse at Sinai with its surrounding frame of medallions of apostles and prophets or of that at Parenzo where the chancel space, effectively the mosaic of the enthroned Virgin amid angels and donors in the apse, is framed by female saints and a long inscription at the base.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

I have been arguing for a very particular quality in Byzantine art—a quality equally present in two- and three-dimensional representations whether within the fully articulated architectural interior of a church, within the microarchitecture of the handleable object (book, reliquary, portable diptych or triptych) or within the dispensation of framing that is so characteristic of the flat icon. It is at once an issue of marking interiority through visual and material gestures—formal gestures we may say—and at the same time of using this to emphasize and indeed interpret the sacred (which is also to say, to create a hierarchy of form and space that places the sacred at its heart, at the point of greatest concealment or framing). Given the reliquary-inspiration of this model of thinking and making, one arguably signaled by John of Damascus in his great eighth-century *summa* of

⁹⁵ See N. P. Ševčenko, "The Icon and the Painter as Hagiographer," *DOP* 53 (1999): 149–65; Peers, *Sacred Shock* (n. 43 above), 77–99; P. Chatterjee, "Archive and Atelier: Sinai and the Case of the Narrative Icon," in *Approaching the Holy Mountain: Art and Liturgy at St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai*, ed. S. Gerstel and R. Nelson (Turnhout, 2010), 319–44; and Chatterjee, *Living Icon* (n. 6.4 above), 67–126. Here one might add the Genoa Mandylion as a case where the iconography of the reverent tells the hagiography of the sacred image whose copy it frames as itself a kind of saint; see Peers, *Sacred Shock*, 117–26.

⁹⁶ For instance, the tenth- to eleventh-century Sinai St. Nicholas with K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons* (Princeton, 1976), no. B.61, pp. 101–2, which Weitzmann claims is the earliest icon with medallions of this kind decorating the frame.

⁹⁷ For instance, the serpentine roundel of the Virgin in the Victoria and Albert Museum with, e.g., R. Ousterhout in Evans and Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium* (n. 47 above), 130, pp. 176–77, or the Sinai icon of the Virgin with Moses and Patriarch Euthymios of Jerusalem which is precisely dated to the 1220s with G. Parpulov in Nelson and Collins, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, no. 53, pp. 259–61.

⁹⁸ For some examples from Sinai see Nelson and Collins, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, no. 25, p. 183, nos. 26–27, pp. 186–89. The issue of inscriptions and icons has a long historiography: see, e.g., H. Maguire, *Image and Imagination: The Byzantine Epigram as Evidence for Viewer Response* (Toronto, 1996) or the essays by C. Barber, R. Nelson, and B. Pentcheva in James, *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, but I know of no specific study of text and image in relation to framing.

⁹⁹ See A. Weyl Carr in Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 244, pp. 372–73 with bibliography.

¹⁰⁰ On Sinai, see G. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress* (Ann Arbor, 1973); on Parenzo, see A. Terry and H. Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eusbasius at Porec* (University Park, PA, 2007). On the phenomenon and with other examples, see Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces* (n. 33 above), 260–71.

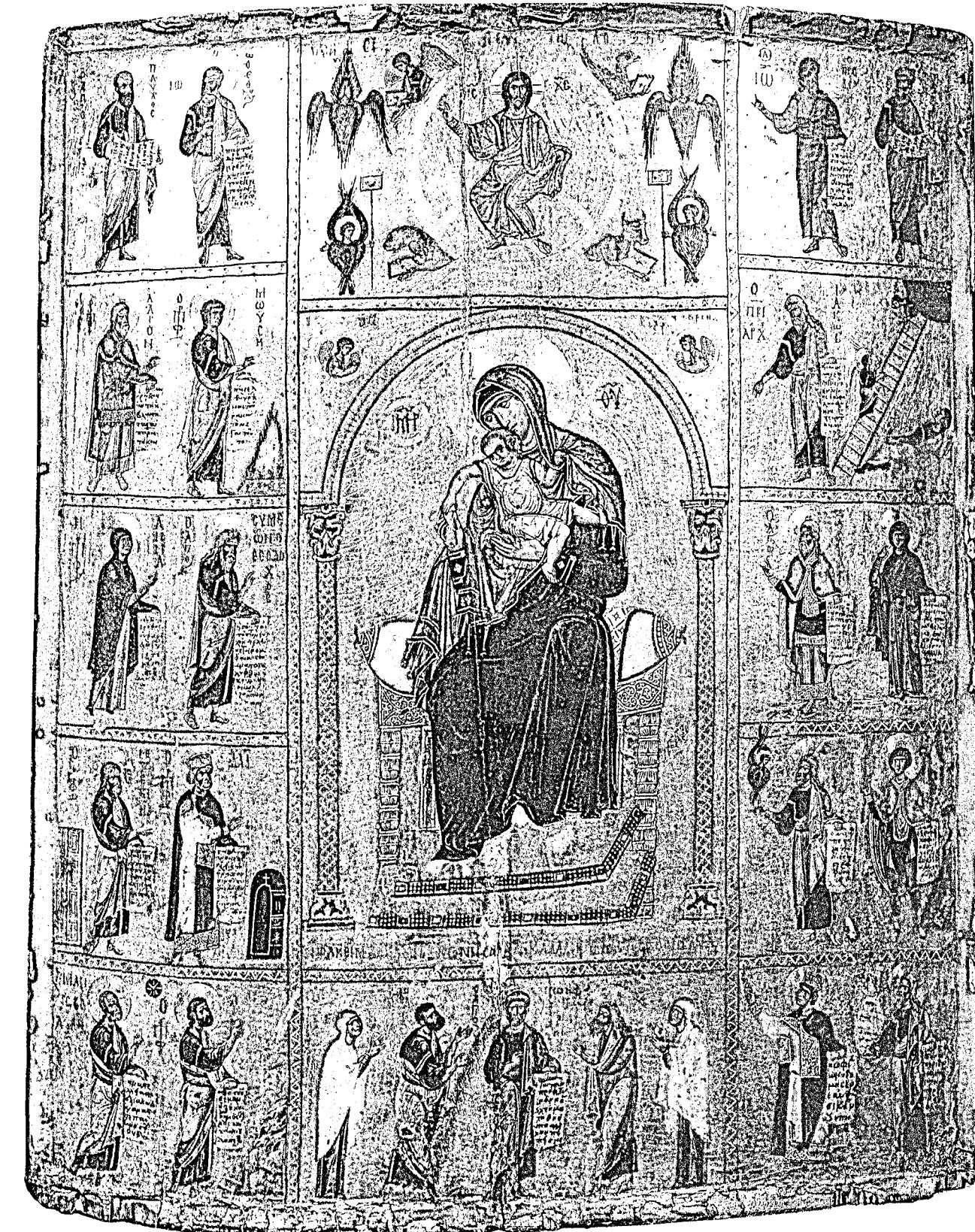


FIG. 1.10 Icon of the Virgin Kykkotissa, enthroned beneath an arch with Christ above and surrounded by saints and prophets, egg tempera and gold on wood, 48.5 × 41.2 cm, ca. 1100 CE. Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. (Photo courtesy Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY)

the faith, *De fide orthodoxa*, where he places the chapter on icons immediately after that on reliques and before that on holy scripture,¹⁰¹ it is not surprising that often that which is most sacred—wood, bone, earth, liquid contained at the heart of an object of this kind—is its least valuable aspect in purely financial terms but also the part that is most basically material. It is important here to emphasize materialism. The sacred—despite the considerable sensual aesthetics of Byzantine art—is not just a symbol or a representation or a vision. Its sanctity rests on and works through its materiality—that is, in terms of a relic its direct metonymic link with the holy as manifested in the real, material world. The icon, like a relic, is only so much wood and pigment, fashioned through the prayers of its commissioners, makers, and viewers into a vehicle capable of contact with its prototype. In the words of John of Damascus in the first of his three treatises in defense of divine images:

I do not worship matter; I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. . . . I salute matter with reverence because God has filled it with his energies (*energeia*) and his grace (*charis*).¹⁰²

The word for “matter” in Greek, repeated throughout John’s defenses of the images, is *hyle*, which wonderfully in the context of panel icons means

¹⁰¹ John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, 88 (relics), 89 (icons), 90 (scripture). See A. Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2002), 185–87.

¹⁰² See John of Damascus, *Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres* 1.16 (cf. 2.14), trans. David Anderson, with K. Parry, *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Leiden, 1996), 24 and 38, and Louth, *St John Damascene*, 202.

“wood” as well as “material stuff.” What deifies matter is *theia energēia* and *charis*—divine energy or power and grace—qualities which by the time they are refined in the fourteenth-century theology of Gregory Palamas have come to be the agents of human unification with the divine.¹⁰³

My argument has been that, despite our poor material survivals of both reliquaries and icons from the period before the ninth century, there is a trajectory of increased and complex spatial interiority that is characteristic of both the Byzantine reliquary and the Byzantine icon, which draws on and develops not only early Christian models but also those of pre-Christian antiquity. This trajectory brilliantly employs the architectural and microcosmic metaphysics of boxes and frames to build a sense of imaginative movement into interior recesses in the beholder (who is also normally a believer and a worshipper within the culture). Both icon and reliquary aid the deification of the viewer as worshipper through a process of accessing the energies of God through his manifestation in matter. The movement toward interiority and concealment in the icon is a paradigm for the movement of the beholder’s prayer in the process of its veneration. In the architectural logic of the icon, image is not transformed into visionary reality, as may be said of the development of sacred images in the late medieval and early Renaissance West. Rather, the sacred center is always marked as non-naturalistic, potentially accessible but always to a certain extent veiled, in the same way that in Palamas’s theology unification with God is possible through his energies as they penetrate matter but not with his essence.

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