Divine Artistry: The Power of Materiality and Craft in Statuette and Arm Reliquaries of the Holy Roman Empire

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Abstract

Statuette and arm reliquaries held unique significance within the Holy Roman Empire. Reliquaries existed as symbols of economic, religious, and political power. Containing the remains of saints, these ornate boxes were beautifully decorated to reflect the power of their associated saint. Often these decorations required complex expensive materials and techniques to create potent images that portrayed biblical figures or events. These gilded feretories sat atop altars in palaces and cathedrals as they were often used in pilgrimage and other devotional practices, as well as being traded and collected by elites. In many cases, leaders often kept reliquaries close at hand as power from reliquaries came from their proximity. Building upon existing research, this paper seeks to address an unrecognized power in reliquaries that focuses on the political and cosmological resonance in the elaborately adorned container rather than the relic inside.

1. Introduction

Relics and reliquaries in the Middle Ages were the center of a fervor of competition between monasteries and political leaders. Both objects were incredibly important to one's own image and power within medieval society, so much so that many monasteries would undertake the difficult process of translating these relics. Translation does not necessarily entail the actual act of translating language. Often, it refers to the act of transferring a relic from one monastery or church to another. If the transfer of the piece was successful, the thought was that the relic and reliquary were meant to be there and that the saint willed it to be there. Some scholars suggest that this was a justification for the theft of relics funded by powerful religious and political leaders whose appetite for these artistic masterpieces showed no limitations. Tales of these translations are tied up in webs of fictions, forgeries, and vague textual resources. By no means can one every truly say that the story of a relic translation is totally true let alone legitimate on any account. However, these legends are crucial for our understanding of the levels of importance of relics during the Middle Ages and no story is as important as the legendary translation of the relic of Saint-Foy of Conques.

In the famous narrative, the relic of Saint Foy was stolen from Agen and taken to Conques. It was recorded twice in different translations of an eleventh century text known as the *Translatio Sanctae Fidei* that monks in Conque had become aware of the famous relic's existence in Agen. The monks stated their reasoning for the acquisition of the relic for "the health of the area and for the redemption of its inhabitants."[1] Then a monk from Conques left the church to spend ten years working and living in the church in Agen. Soon after gaining the trust of the clergy and the community, he was left alone. The monk thief soon desecrated the tomb of the Saint Foy and stole her away to Conques. Soon the thieving monk was met with a most joyous return to the city. This translation occurred on January 14th 865 or 866 CE., However, it is possible that this is an entire work of fiction.[2] Nevertheless, this legendary tale persisted through history. By 883 CE., the remains of the saint were recognized by donors and lay patrons. Consequently, through the Middle Ages, Saint Foy worked her miracle in Conques and despite protests from Agen the devout accepted that Conques would always be her home. Sadly, Agen was never able to lay claim again to the

relic and its recognition.[3] This story whether it be fictitious or not highlights the power and status that figurative reliquaries had on medieval society and reliquaries' innate cosmological and political power.

Shaped reliquaries and the relics they housed were at the center of life within the Holy Roman Empire. Often called upon in sacred spaces through prayer and pilgrimage, Catholics believed that these items were conduits in which a saint could manifest his or her power in our physical realm. In many cases reliquaries served as representations not of the physical remains of the saint but as representations of the saint in life. Holy relics were fiercely collected and traded among elites of the empire as their implied power ultimately resided in proximity. Thus, collecting sanctified objects placed in ornate jeweled feretories served a complex role not only as a symbol of wealth but also an elite's absolute power. Through the implementation of complex crafts and jewels, these feretories were created with rare and precious materials that vouch for legitimacy and the wealth of the patron. Arm and statuette reliquaries specifically were not only made in this way to be extremely pleasing to the eye but also to be imbued with powerful imagery. The concept of power regarding arm reliquaries is deeply intertwined in their materiality as well as in their gesture. Smaller complex statuette reliquaries garnered power through symbolic imagery and fine art works that interacted on a deeper emotional level with the observer lending these pieces power as complex ornate devotional tools. Medieval goldsmiths imbued these reliquaries with power through the implementation of labor-intensive processes and the usage of statuette and arm reliquaries as storytelling devices. These specific containers were also given great economic and political significance as each piece existed within a complex interwoven system of cosmological and political power which gave statuette and arm reliquaries greater power than what they contained.
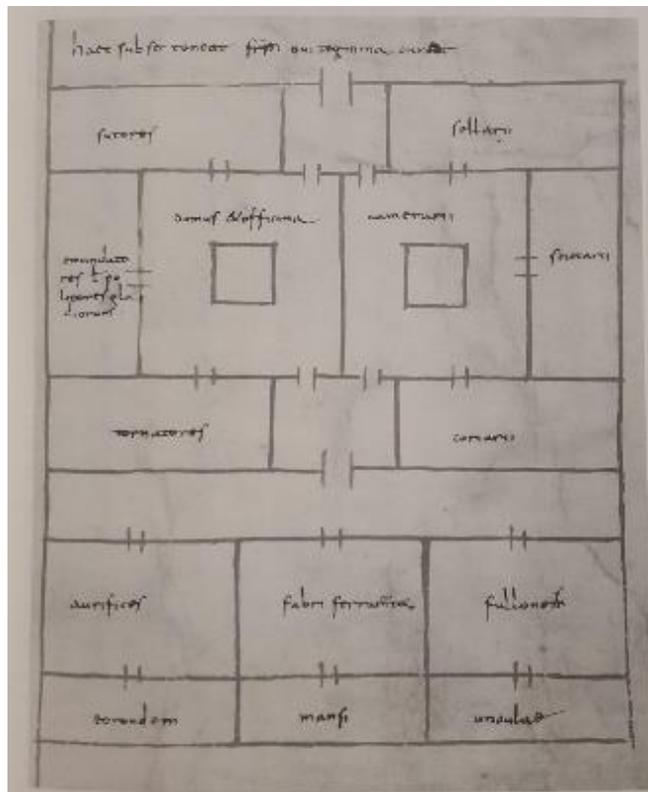
2. Goldsmiths of the Middle Ages

Figure 1. *Plan of Annex of main workshop in the ninth century monastic plan preserved at the Abbey of St. Gall*, ninth century, Switzerland. Ink on Paper.
https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS832US832&biw=1440&bih=850&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=xgisXP6sG--I_Qb
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During the Middle Ages there were many guilds responsible for a variety of art and architecture but there was only one guild which worked with incredibly precious metals, complex alloys, and rare jewels imported from distant locations. These were the monastic and secular goldsmiths of the Middle Ages; and they were responsible for taking these immensely precious materials and shaping them into fine jewelry, ornamentation, as well as religious reliquaries. There are key distinctions between secular and monastic goldsmiths. Monastic goldsmiths, often members of the Catholic Church, would live and work within monasteries and abbeys tucked away in artisanal communities. Often the living spaces of the goldsmiths were near their workshops as well as other fellow metal workers and blacksmiths. Evidence presented in the plan of Abbey of St. Gall of Switzerland (Fig. 1) illustrates the closeness of workshops and living spaces which were kept in the same building but separate from the rest of the monastery due to the nature of the heat intensive labor required in the shaping of metal. These monastic goldsmiths would be hired to work in teams on the reliquaries and other fine objects the monastery could afford such as shrines, decorative book covers, and of course, reliquaries.[4]

In direct contrast to the religious world of the monastic goldsmiths, the secular goldsmiths worked in their own workshops and studios away from any religious space. These goldsmiths would be hired to create fine ornamentation, jewelry, and other luxury goods for royalty, nobility, and other high-ranking members of society. In many cases these luxury goods included fine drink and plate ware, broches, rings, cups, and other objects. Furthermore, secular goldsmiths were responsible for the creation and distribution of the fine gold coinage and other medieval currency.[5] Under the patronage of high society and the church, goldsmiths bolstered the luxury economy and cemented their place in history as a highly skilled artistic guild. In many cases these artists would be required to work a staggering number of tools and techniques to create these masterpieces.

Consequently, goldsmiths relied on a complex set of tools and techniques that were implemented in the creation of the variety of their fine art. There were no categorical distinctions for those artists who worked solely with silver or copper alloys and jewels. In many cases if one worked with materials deemed precious one fell under the category of goldsmith. The difficulty of creating such artworks which would require ornate decorations such as filigree and gold leafing led the goldsmith to work with an extensive set of tools. Recorded in Alexander Neckham's twelfth century writings of a *Secular Goldsmith's Workshop in Paris*, exists an extensive illustration of the daily tools many goldsmiths used in their work. In his descriptions Neckham states that the goldsmith and his apprentice must have in their workshop a variety of tools at their disposal such as a furnace, bellow, a hard anvil, tongs, hammers, sharp chisels, a touchstone, a rabbit's foot,[6] leather aprons, pottery and wire, and finally wax or clay covered tables.[7] He also suggests the goldsmith must have the skills and the experience to distinguish different types of precious metals and materials as well as the ability to draw, chisel, carve, hammer, and mend objects—emphasizing the extreme education and skill it takes to be a goldsmith.
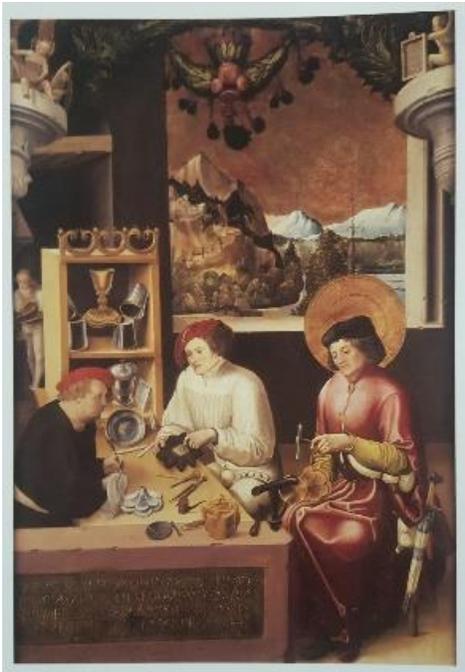
Figure 2. Niclaus Manuel, *Saint Eligus at his work*, 1515, Paint on wood, Museum of Fine Arts Bern,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eligius_1515.jpg

The societal value of goldsmiths can be found within several different artistic pieces of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as the representation of Saint Eligus in his workshop painted by Niclaus Manuel in 1515 (Fig. 2). St. Eligius can be seen at the end of a table molding the rim of a golden chalice around the nose of an anvil. The saint works near other artists as one sits directly next to him and another goldsmith sits across the table. The proximity to the other goldsmiths, as well as the lack of hierarchal scale amongst figures, suggests that the other goldsmiths within the painting were held in in similar regard to Saint Eligius. The only signifier of Saint Eligius' sanctity is a golden halo that wraps around his head in a perfect circle. Saint Eligus, a patron saint of many things from goldsmiths to stableman, is an important figure in the history of goldsmiths. Many goldsmiths in the Middle Ages often worked together in a small group within a workshop. This piece illustrates the closeness and the bond the saint had with his fellow goldsmiths. Arguably monastic and secular goldsmiths already had value and status in a society as skilled craftsmen able to work with rare and precious materials. With the inclusion of a saint who is also a goldsmith another layer is added to the inherent societal value of goldsmiths. Monastic goldsmiths held even greater religious significance in direct association with the craft and practice of Saint Eligus. While goldsmiths gained greater societal value through their association with a goldsmithing saint, the common inclusion of staggeringly expensive materials added immense monetary value as well.

Scholar John Cherry argues that gold and silver were recognized within biblical text as being directly connected to the word of God. This can be found Psalm 12:6 "The worlds of the Lord are unalloyed: silver refined in a crucible, gold purified seven times over."[8] This quote denotes the immense and sacred significance of gold and silver in comparison to the powerful and unwavering word of God. Admittedly, the quote has been used metaphorically; however, it can explain the cosmological significance of two of the key materials implemented in the creation of medieval reliquaries. Gold in many cases was also incredibly difficult to collect and store as a resource for use within the different sacred and secular artworks of the Middle Ages. Gold panning was a common way in which gold was gathered for use. However, the method of panning was labor intensive, time consuming, and would only produce very small amounts of material needed for much larger projects. In many cases the gold used in the creation of fine art objects was taken from already existing artifacts plundered from fallen societies such as Byzantine crosses, Fatimid jewelry, in some cases, Roman coins. The recycling of gold became commonplace from approximately 700 CE to 1200 CE when sources of gold could not meet demands and so gold would be taken from conquered cultures.[9] However, around the early thirteenth century, war and subsequently trade with Arabic societies provided a large influx of gold in the form of raw material and coinage and thus the importance of the material was cemented within medieval

society as gold grew from an economic system in which it was more an item of rarity then a luxury good only the elite could control.

Gold and silver held sway in the empire as symbols of wealth because of their scarcity and luster but what about the complex techniques required in the decoration of relics? In the case of Romanesque reliquaries, the surface decoration would often include the use of *repousse,* wire filigree, as well as *niello*. *Niello* is often made of a copper and silver sulphide and would be fired onto the engraved metallic piece or into enamel. The *repousse technique* consisted of working the piece with a hammer. This technique often involved hammering the front of a metallic piece and then carving into it with a tool to get thin strips of metal. Filigree was simply wire consisting of varying materials soldered onto a piece, in most cases it formed floral or vegetal motifs that surround gem settings or highlight other aspects of the artwork.[10] However, the most widely used method of embellishing Romanesque works was through complex enamel decorations.

Craftsmen used enameling to add monetary value, rich colors, and to add illustrations of biblical figures and stories. The *champlevé* and *baisse taille* enameling found in the clear majority of Romanesque reliquaries required labor-intensive processes. First materials such as flint or fine grain sand, potash, soda or lead would have been heated to form a clear flux material. Next, oxidizing materials such as copper or cobalt would be added as coloring agents. When the material cooled, it would be taken and ground into a fine powder and washed to remove organic impurities. The fine ground flux would be placed on a specially made metallic surface. The piece would then be fired in a kiln reaching temperatures approaching 800˚C. However, the heating process was not perfect and would often require multiple firings in a kiln. The final product would be cooled and polished to remove imperfections and brighten colors.[11] While this was a standard process for enameling the key differences between *baisse taille and champlevé* enameling lie in the prepared metal surface. *Champlevé* enameling would require the smith to carve fine yet deep ridges into the piece. Engraving would leave small depressions in which varying colors of enameling powder would be added. There were often several colored powders used within single pieces. Since the grooves needed to be carved into the metal often thicker plates were used such as copper or other dense metallic alloys.[12]

Baisse taille enameling expanded upon this process in the thirteenth century. The *baisse taille* process first substituted the traditional colored enamel flux with translucent flux. The design would be carved in a low relief rather than in deep depressions thus allowing for the implementation of thin precious metals such as gold and silver. Several variations in tone and color would be created by varying the depths in which a goldsmith would carve a design. The depths of the grooves would have allowed for variations on the reflections of light from the thin metallic plate below creating a rich color scheme. The famed Italian sculptor and goldsmith, Benvenuto Cellini, wrote that one can only create a hard-translucent red color using gold. Evidence suggests that silver used in this process needed to be of the highest quality as well and completely free of impurities. Evidence taken from a Norwich goldsmith in England during the year 1426-27 CE provides evidence that he dramatically increased the price of a certain form of silver used in his work to add a dramatic increase of monetary value as well as status associated with owning a piece made from such material. Thus, while reliquaries served as symbols of cosmological power, they also served as medieval status symbols signifying the wealth and status of the patron. To help understand why goldsmiths took great care in the creation of reliquaries to hold relics one must understand the veneration of relics, sacredness of the body, and the relics' place within the cosmology of Christianity.

3. Veneration of relics through history

The ideas pertaining to the sacredness of the physical body did not appear until the execution of Saint Polycarp in the year 155 CE. According to scholar Arnold Angenendt, "his bones were more valuable to us than precious stones and finer than refined gold."[13] Saint Polycarp's bones were subsequently collected after the events surrounding his death and according to scholars is the first known case of the body being regarded as a holy relic within the Christian context.[14]

The event surrounding St. Polycarp marks the turning point in the Christian tradition in which the body is given sacred significance and can be considered a holy relic. However, relics were not treated the same way across history. One of the key ideas surrounding relics and reliquaries is that they acted as conduits through which a saint can be called upon to perform a miraculous act. The physical form had cosmological significance as the power of the saint in Heaven was still being transmitted directly into the body of the saint. Cosmological power did not just manifest in the human body, but it also sanctified the very earth around them. The final resting spots of saints were sanctified through proximity with their bodies ultimately imbuing them with a sacredness centered around a physical location.

Accordingly, scholar Mircea Eliade stated in *The Sacred and Profane*, "the Earth opens upward into the heavens" thus furthering the idea that the body serves as supernatural line of communication within Christian cosmology.[15]

Likewise, historian Charles Freeman suggests that the bodies of saints served as portals from which the souls of the saint could be contacted within the heavenly realms. A long-standing ideology from the Middle Ages illustrated that saints were individuals who at the time of death were already present with God and therefore held higher power and influence within Heaven. Thus, these figures were often called upon not just to perform miracles but to offer heavenly intervention.[16] The power that the saint or other powerful Christian figures could intervene within the physical and heavenly realms could also hold sway over the final location of one's immortal soul. Pilgrims and patrons called upon saints through different physical interactions such as prayer or the act of touch. These miracles could heal or strike down the enemies of the individual calling upon the saint. These ideas are all evidence that in the early days of relic veneration the body held great cosmological power but there was a determining stipulation to this idea.[17]

For saints to be able to manifest their full power, their bodies must be intact as is or the divine figure could not manifest their power. This power known as *Virtus* only existed if the saint was complete and uncorrupted.[18] The nature of the saint was identified in two ways within the Christian tradition. The first way was done by studying the rates of decay. The corpses of saints were said to be in near perfect condition and would stay in a freshly dead state for extremely long periods of time. According to Saint Ambrosius, Bishop of Milan, the bodies of the martyrs of Gervasius and Protasius that he had raised were all complete and that St. Augustine described these bodies as incorrupt bodies. The second way a saint could be identified in death is the presence of a pleasant and sweet aroma. The pleasant scent needed to be present upon the exhuming of their final resting space. In the late tenth century saintly bodies were not only exhumed from their tombs to be venerated but also divided and sent across the world.[19]

Throughout the ninth and early tenth centuries, saints who had passed away remained in their graves and would lay undisturbed. The inclination to leave the bodies to their peace was a long-held tradition until Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, exhumed the bodies of saints beginning in fourth century Italy. Saint Ambrose wished to establish a strong and vital link between the heavenly realm and the earthly plains within sacred altars through the translation of the bodies of saints. The first recorded instance of the exhuming of a saint occurred in the year 386 CE. on the seventeenth of June. Saint Ambrose exhumed the bodies of Saint Gervasius and Saint Protasius to have their bodies placed within altars within the Basilica di Sant' Ambrogio. The practice of exhuming bodies to be sent to altars established the tradition of relic altars holding saints and martyrs as well as the establishing of the connection between altars and tombs of saints.

Philosopher, Saint Augustine of Hippo, suggested in the early fourth century that certain body parts can be removed during the translation of relics. Items such as the fingernails, toenails, hair, and even blood of a saint were thought to replenish after death and therefore were deemed superfluous and removable. Body parts deemed nonessential were the only instance of actual human remains being removed and used as relics until the late tenth century. These events are also supported by the recordings cited in the *Vita Amandi* that detail the events surrounding the translation of Saint Amandus.[20] The translation of St. Amandus took place around 809 CE and during that time the abbot of a monastery in Belgium is said to have cut off his nails, and removed teeth and hair. Allegedly, the fingernails had been growing after death and were then deemed that they could be cut.[21]

While only superficial items such as fingernails, toenails and hair were removed after death, there are instances where items freed from the body at the time of death are kept separate and can be held independently. These items that were removed or divided at death were still considered whole and could manifest the saint's full power. The heads of Peter and Paul which are held in the Basilica of St. John in Rome are still considered whole even though they are very much separate from their original bodies.[22] While these accounts illustrate the early beginnings of the division of remains within the Christian context, a great hesitation still lingered to remove anything more

The idea of separating superficial body parts really began to change in the late tenth century into the removal of entire body parts from the remains of a saint. Two men named Einhard and Rabanus Maurus who were the Abbot of Fulda and the Archbishop of Mainze, respectively, are the first known cases of individuals who separated large crucial body parts from the bodies of saints. These two sent out to another archbishop different pieces of Saint Peter as well as Saint Marcellinus. These pieces had been taken from their own personal collection of relics and shipped off. Accounts recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis* state there had been some form of divine intervention that had taken place which caused him to request the relics of St. Marcellinus to be returned to him. Even though, at this time, there still seemed to be hesitation surrounding the division of relics, it was now commonplace for relics to be divided up and translated across medieval Europe. The hesitation was justified through the Catholic Church in a new ideology that posited that the saint could manifest themselves into the individual parts of their own bodies and that they no longer need a complete vessel to have full power and perform their own miracles.[23] According to scholars such as Charles Freeman, the most common relics removed from saints and martyrs were contact relics not the bones of the saints. Contact relics included garments, textiles, footwear, furniture and a plethora of earthly belongings that had some

association with a saint.[24] Many of these contact relics were accompanied by a small swatch of paper that vouched for its authenticity. If the slip of paper did not suffice as an accurate measure of authentication, in some cases, relics were burned to see if the object would survive.[25] All these items eventually became extensions of the saint all of which served in the most basic sense, as a supernatural line of communication from which the saint could be called upon for miracles or divine intervention. Accordingly, divine power can manifest itself and pass itself onto the blessed.

4. Statuette Reliquaries, St. Christopher

Figure 3. *Statuette of Saint Christopher*, 1425-50, raised, cast, engraved, punched, partially gilded silver, Height, 44.2. Inscribed: IHESUS, Gottfried Keller Foundation, https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2001/basel-cathedral/photo-gallery

The statuette of Saint Christopher (Fig. 3) freezes the likeness of the saint and the Christ Child in near lifelike detail. The reliquary itself is hollow and consists of a single piece of raised silver. Like many statuette reliquaries this piece was not meant to glorify and magnify the relic that sits inside it as it was meant to have a purpose in telling a story or highlighting key biblical figures and their own individual power. The legend of Saint Christopher and the Christ Child, which had only become popular during the early fifteenth century, told the story that Christopher crossed a river unknowingly carrying the Christ Child upon his back.[26] The base of the reliquary is octagonal, and it is characterized by a band of silver lattice work near the bottom as it rises into a watery shoreline which consumes the saint's feet up to the ankles obscuring them from vision. The bottom of his staff is consumed as well within the dense flowing water carved intricately to imitate crashing waves. The staff itself is a large thin oak branch which rises high up into the saint's outstretched hand. The staff is marked by miniscule indentations resembling bark, with several wooden knots and small leaves protruding from the large branch.

As one's eyes are drawn up the branch they pass Saint Christopher's silver hand locked in firm grip underneath a knot of two intertwining leaves. Carefully engraved lines on his hand mark the knuckle and other ridges where his fingers bend and curve around the staff. Right above his hand sits a bushel of branches and leaves curling and collapsing over one another. The piece forces a visual line from the bottom of the sculpture to the top highlighting the intricacy of Saint Christopher's dress in the way the silver folds over itself like real fabric locked in his hand. At his hand also dangle several accoutrements and a cape or hood flows down his backside. The Christ Child sits atop the saint's shoulder holding a golden sphere representing the world orb. The child's hands outstretch with curious intent towards the end of the branch as Saint Christopher looks on with warmth. His long beard pours down over his neck and chest.

The Christ Child is depicted in a silver robe which has been altered to appear golden. Christ is depicted kneeling on the shoulder of Saint Christopher as the bottom right foot of the child is shown peeking out under his robe towards the back of the piece. The beard of Saint Christopher is engraved in such a way that it imbues the piece with natural realism. Saint Christopher's hair is held back by a woven silver cloth which winds and spirals its way around his head meeting at a knot in the back bound tightly with rope. Below this knot sits a small opening in which a relic could be placed or removed from the inside of the hollow statuette, however it is unclear what relic was stored within the piece at the time.

While as it was common that many statuette reliquaries tell a story, the true power of this small devotional piece lies in the immense detail and care implemented in the creation of the work. The subtle engraving of silver to resemble waves, as well as the time and effort it took to create this piece arguably adds to its intrinsic value as a status symbol among the elite. The piece itself was a gift to the Basel Cathedral by Ludwig Mog, one of the four chaplains of the cathedral at the time. The piece was either given to the cathedral during a plague which broke out during the time of the Council of Basel, or just as likely it was given as a gift to Pope Eugenius IV as a private piece meant for his own personal use. Pope Eugenius IV presided over a tumultuous time in history particularly with the Council of Basel. While Pope Martin V called for the council's creation it appears that Eugenius IV had to confirm it.[27] However, during his reign the council seemed to diverge from his command and invoked a series of decrees that tried to limit papal power. The situation between the council and the pope grew tense but fear of a schism pushed the councils' leaders to comply with the pope. Soon he had moved it to Florence while a splinter sect of the council chose to remain. Ultimately, Pope Eugenius had united the Basel-Ferrera-Florence council and the public opinion of the remaining Basel council had soured over time. Thus, in the end the papal influence and presence had grown positive in the public eye because of these events. While it seems, the pope was preoccupied with the Council of Basel he was a patron of the arts and it is still a plausible theory that this might have been given a private gift by a compliant church chaplin to slip into the popes' good graces.[28]

5. King David

One of the most ostentatious statuette reliquaries, the statuette of King David (Fig. 4) shines brightly as a key example of the extreme craft and materiality put into statuette reliquaries. The statuette is made up of an amalgamation of different precious materials such as raised, cast, cut and gilded precious metals, sardonyx, a second century visage of a gorgon, several gemstones, enameled *basse-taille* glass, a figurine of the Virgin Mary, and a wooden base. The base is an octagonal wooden core gilded in gold, reinforced with simple geometric bands that rise up supporting quatrefoils that sit directly below the *baisse-taille* enameling. The structuring of the octagonal base resembles a large spire. The enameling sits like windows on the reliquary highlighting several unnamed figures surrounded by scrolls with different inscriptions scrawled upon them. Each glass piece sits inside of a triangular roof structure marked by ornate decorations. Right above that is a carved gilded banderol in which letters are carved out of the center denoting who is featured in the piece. The banderol rests in the hands of David as it wraps around the center of the piece before falling behind his arms. Light brickwork is depicted in gold right above these windows behind the hands of David reinforcing the architectural aspects of the piece and further emphasizing David's quiet strength. The figure of David which rises out of the detailed brickwork is covered in a golden colored cloth that delicately flows across his torso and down his long sleeves. The cloth is held together by a golden rope placed around his waist. A sardonyx carved lion sits facing the viewer, while a figurine of the Virgin Mary holding Christ is located right above it. The face of David is adapted from a second century gorgon which sits inside of a golden, enameled cowl.[29] The crown located above the cowl is made up of several gemstones, with a precious garnet facing outward from the face of the King David.

Figure 4. *Statuette of King David*, 1290-1310, raised, cast, cut, gold, with sardonyx cameo, glass, garnet, raised, cast, and gilded silver, with translucent *basse-taille* enamel, glass, gemstones, gilded wood, height, 21.6 cm, Historisches Museum Basel. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-65049-4_2

This piece was not crafted in its entirety during the late thirteenth century. In fact, the entire object is made up of several pieces that had been collected over time. The initial statuette was dated to 1290 CE. and only the upper body and head of David. The face is that of a second century gorgon, and the figurine of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child is dated from the early twelfth century. During the thirteenth century the relic wound up in the treasury of the Basel Cathedral in which several additions and changes were made. In the early fourteenth century the hands were remodeled to hold the flowing scroll. The crown was added during the fifteenth century, by the church itself. The body of the statuette was incorporated into the tower structure at the time when the crown was added.[30] The structure which makes up the base was added along with the complex enamels and a spring lock mechanism for the King David statuette.

The original patron of the statuette of King David, Master Johannes, has been connected to a long line of powerful figures including the Hapsburgs (who were connected to the entirety of Europe for six hundred and forty years). He gifted the piece to the church in a bid to cleanse his mortal soul. Master Johannes was a physician to the Duke Leopold I of Austria who was the son of a Hapsburg king, Albert I. The duke was also husband to the powerful Catherine of Savoy. Master Johannes as it seems was not a poor nobleman. He was also a man who cared quite a lot about his eternal soul as illustrated by the fact that Master Johannes put forth thirty shillings for an annual mass to pray for him. Master Johannes was deeply entrenched in mendicant orders and was buried in the Dominican Church in Basel. The Dominicans during the Middle Ages enjoyed high status and close association with the Habsburg family.[31] So, it seems this relic sits as tribute from a man who had extremely close ties with an interwoven network of important historical figures and families. Thus, this object sits as not only a gift to the church but a statement of power from a very well-connected nobleman.

6. Man of sorrows

Figure 5. *Man of Sorrows reliquary*, 1137-49, silver gilt, enamel, semiprecious stones, 29.5 x 21.3 x 12.7 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-with-the-Man-of-Sorrows.php

While reliquaries can evoke strong emotions, the reliquary of the Man of Sorrows (Fig. 5) is a unique piece in that it is a private devotional reliquary meant to be seen by an individual or a select few. The sculpture does not exceed the length of a foot in any direction. The smaller size indicates this piece was not meant to be a large complex altarpiece and instead a more portable gift and part of an elite gift economy between high ranking members of the Holy Roman Empire. Ultimately, the size of this reliquary is a sign that this piece was not meant to make a grand statement about power and religion and instead meant to evoke strong emotions such as empathy and experientiality of the reliquary. While the question of who created this relic is still vigorously debated among art historical scholars, there is evidence that suggests a specific patron. According to translations of an inscription on the base of the reliquary, as well as the inclusion of Moravia's and Bohemia's coat of arms the piece was commissioned by John Volek, Bishop of Olomouc as a gift for Emperor Charles the IV.[32] John Volek had received a thorn from the estate of his half-sister Elizabeth of Premysl the mother of Emperor Charles IV. Emperor Charles IV of Bohemia lived and ruled for about 60 years.[33] Some scholars have suggested that the views of Charles across the empire varied during his reign as some saw him as weak, indolent or self-indulgent. He had little care or attention to matters regarding Germany and had allowed the country to slip away and pursue its own prerogatives. However, in contrast to his short comings with the empire and Germany, Charles IV had devoted the majority, if not all his attention to the citizens of Bohemia in such a form that his reign was a gilded age in Bohemian culture and lifestyle. Emperor Maximillian is quoted as calling him a model father to Bohemia and a model step father to Germany.[34] Emperor Charles IV brought the capital of Prague up into the world stage. Charles IV founded a prominent university that lasts to this day and strengthened church power before reforming the clergy. Arguably Charles IV is a prominent figure for turning Bohemia into a religious, political, and economic powerhouse.[35] So, to commission a gift as a devotional piece for another political connection from a loving bishop would not have been out of place. This gift would have served as a means to gain political favor often times ending in the accruement of power and support. The emperor was also known to have a deep fondness for collecting relics, so it would not be unusual to gift him an ornate devotional reliquary destined for his private collection as a piece to contemplate and observe. The piece itself is also dated to a time when Charles's influence as emperor was at its peak during 1347-1349 CE. The symbolism inherent in the piece is equally important when discussing the role of

it as a private devotional reliquary. The reliquary was meant to be contemplated and studied to evoke strong emotions within the observer while simultaneously invoking the power of the relic inside it.

The statuette of Christ is made of a silver gilt and enameled in the champlevé style. Champlevé enamel was a common artistic style among medieval reliquary makers. The gilt and enameling draw attention away from the thorn and raise the viewers' eyes to the visage of Christ. This helps highlight Christ's emaciated features, his instruments of suffering and his own quiet expression. As it draws one's eyes upward one notices a semiprecious stone is set in silver atop Christ's head located in the front of the crown of thorns facing outwards. The thorns of the crown appear to be active and sprawling out in many different directions as if the thorns were moving on top of the head of Christ. The implementation of the stone in the crown fixes the gaze directly onto Christ's solemn expression.

The statuette of Christ features a round distended stomach which protrudes slightly outwards. Deep grooves are carved between Christ's pectorals as well as down the sides of his body possibly to indicate malnourishment. Christ shows no sign of physical fitness as there does not appear to be signs of muscle definition on the arms, torso, or legs. Christ is depicted stripped of his clothing with only a cloth around his waist that ends right below his knees. Three dice sit strewn at his feet symbolizing those Roman soldiers used in gambling for his belongings. The iconography of Christ as the centerpiece of the work creates an intense dramatization of the events invoking a visualization within the viewer as well as creating a sense of experience within the observer. A large cross rests lightly on his left arm, loosely clasped in his right hand. Two hinges have been placed on either side of the cross to allow for the face of the cross to open. The cross supposedly held a piece of the True Cross or possibly a contact relic.[36] Christ's arms are in perfect alignment with the arms of the cross and the top of the column forming a direct visual line from right to left across the piece. A rooster sits atop the column grasping it with his claws. The rooster serves as a sculptural reference to the biblical writings in which Peter denied Christ three times before the rooster crows. The column bound with a spiraling metal rope represents the column of flagellation in which Christ was severely beaten before bearing his cross.

Placed in between the soldier's dice sits an empty well which at one point held the thorn from Christ's crown. The empty setting is held by a tiny figure with hinges attached to his back indicating that his arms were able to move up and down. The figure holds the relic outright facing the observer. The reliquary setting is covered with a small piece of glass to protect the thorn within. To the left of the cross sits a winged angel holding up what is possibly a switch used to beat Christ. The extended oval shape and engraved ridges suggest that the torture instrument is made of plant matter. The angel is also holding a wooden rod with three rings. In the angel's left hand is a large silver hammer with a thin handle and a sharp pointed head. All instruments were implemented in the torture of Christ. To the right of the column of flagellation sits another winged angel with arms outstretched and hands clasping around two large nails. The angel's right-hand rests on the column of flagellation. Each of these visual elements serve a role as pieces of theater which tell the story of the crucifixion of Christ, emphasizing different aspects of his suffering for the observer to contemplate. These strong symbols provoke an intense emotional response within the observer as the relic was never meant to be the center of the reliquary. The statuette was meant to be a powerful devotional tool designed to evoke deep introspective thought and visceral emotions within the observer. The Man of Sorrows reliquary serves as an example of how the marriage of fine craftsmanship and symbology works to give the piece greater political and cosmological power than just the relic that sits inside it.

7. St. George

Sitting atop a small rocky outcropping supported by three ornately decorated feet stands the reliquary statuette of St. George. (Fig. 6) Saint George like the statuette of the Man of Sorrows is a considerably smaller feretory most likely commissioned as a portable private gift for a chivalric order bearing the saint's name. The piece is a small but innately complex work of art consisting of painted glass and a silver gilt. At the feet of the reliquary vines and other vegetal motifs rise to meet a visage of a man with a great beard. This beard then reaches down and morphs back into the vines forming the legs of the piece. The round base of the reliquary is marked by a row of downward facing spikes resembling a rope fence. Directly above the fence is a second silver rope fence surrounding a small rocky outcropping in which St. George is eternally locked in a struggle against a dragon. Facing outward from the rock is a circular hole which would have held a relic.

Figure 6. *Reliquary Statuette of St. George*, 1480-1490, Silver, partially gilded, height, 30.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/reliquary-statue-of-st-george/2wEkE-Dpoplnsg

St. George, clad in silver armor, stands atop the fearsome dragon. In the scene, St. George has already thrust and broken his lance inside of the dragon and the weapon sits bent and broken across the mound resting its tip within the dragon's back. The dragon raises up its maw to bite and hold George's shield, as the tail rises to connect with his hip. Saint George twists his torso as he raises his sword upward against the beast and lowers his gaze downward creating a visual line that draws the eyes up to the sword and slashes down with his gaze almost as if the eyes complete the action. Saint George's golden colored hair flows down in tightly woven curls over his shoulders while a silver crown like helm sits atop his brow, almost crowning him as a saint.

Figure 7. *St. George*, 1435–1503, Woodcut Engraving, plate: 2 3/8 x 3 5/16 in. (6 x 8.3 cm), sheet: 11 9/16 x 7 1/2 in. (29.4 x 19.1 cm). https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/384302

Regarding the St. George piece, it is not so much the patron but the artist to whom it is attributed to that is mired in speculation. One scholar notes that it is currently accepted as being attributed to Bernt Notke. However, this is highly debated as this work is iconographically and stylistically connected to an earlier piece residing in Hamburg and both pieces are based off a similar wood carving by the famous Israhel Van Meckenem which now resides in the

Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Fig. 7) Each of these pieces are highly speculative and create an aura of mystery around the relic and highlights the importance and mass following of St. George.[37]

8. Arm Reliquaries

Figure 8. *Arm Reliquary of Saint Walpert*, 13th century, Raised, stamped, engraved, partially gilded silver, gilded copper filigree, Glass, Rock Crystal cabochons, chalcedony cameo, onyx cameo, carnelian, doublets, wooden core, 63.5 cm.
https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS832US832&q=arm+reliquary+of+st+walpert&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjEnczdgcLhAhVFn-AKHUryBbkQsAR6BAgJEAE&biw=1440&bih=850&dpr=1.5#imgrc=CII-nsjNTLKzYM:

The arm reliquary of Saint Wolpert (Fig. 8) sits atop a silver base with an arch located between the feet of the piece. Raised silver discs engraved with images of unnamed figures at work behind desks mark the front face of the piece. Other raised engraved discs sit on the left and right sides of the reliquary; however, the images on them have disappeared with time. Inventories recorded by the Basel treasury state that certain discs on the base contained zoomorphic imagery. Large ovals of rock crystal are set on the upper corners of the base of the reliquary. The first and largest vestment sleeve made of gilded silver is centered on the base with skillfully crafted wrinkles and creases in the metal that mimics the creasing of fabric. Over time, the reliquary endured considerable degradation which can be seen in the many small divots that mar the first sleeve closest to the base of the piece. The cuff of the sleeve is characterized by large amounts of complex copper filigree which twirl and twist around the cuff in floral and vegetal vines. The filigree sits tightly wrapped around the settings of precious stones such as chalcedony, onyx, carnelian and jasper. The usage of gemstones adds visual stimulation to a piece which otherwise is made up of two shades of color created using copper and silver. The implementation of gold adds not only a richness in value but a richness in color which would otherwise be absent from the piece. The arm wrapped tightly by a secondary sleeve continues upwards. This sleeve consists of delicately engraved silver. The engraving is a simple geometric pattern, as well as several spherical copper buttons rise up in a line on one side. In the center of this sleeve is a noticeable seam in which the arm would be able to come apart and a reliquary placed inside. The cuff itself repeats the same ornate copper filigree pairing with colorful precious stones also set in copper.

   An unnamed arm reliquary (Fig. 9) is currently in a collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and originated from the Meuse river valley in southern Netherlands. The reliquary dated to the year 1230 CE. consists of gilded silver, niello, and precious stones. The piece is also locked in the same gesture of the blessing. While the gesture of the hand is similar this reliquary does contain some rather unique differences for a piece constructed in the Holy

Roman Empire. This piece features two small viewing slats originally covered in glass from which a patron could see the bones held within. Instead of being a top loading reliquary, the reliquary is constructed in a way that it opens much like an instrument case in that it opens and closes around the relic. The trimmings of the vestments are marked with complex silver filigree which depict vines and other vegetal motifs. Precious stones, as well as niello engravings are set in place around the trimmings as well. The niello engravings consist of images of angels, unnamed saints, and more vegetal motifs. A large swath of the vestment itself, like the reliquary of Saint Wolpert, is marred by significant damage in the form of large cracks, flaking, patch repairs, as well as the loss of several stones. However, this piece in its time would have been a shining example of thirteenth century craftsmanship and materiality. Materiality in these pieces is emphasized in the third Romanesque arm reliquary taken from the southeast of France on the edges of the Holy Roman Empire.

Figure 9. *Arm Reliquary*, 13th century, Silver, gilded silver, niello, and gems; wood core, 64.8 x 16.5 x 10.2 cm. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471270

The rock crystal arm reliquary, (Fig. 10) in comparison with the other Romanesque arm reliquaries is rather unique in its emphasis on the use of rock crystal. The piece itself is monochromatic, characterized by three massive semi-spheres of rock crystal. The top sphere located on the front half of the vestments contains a small piece of parchment inscribed with the name of the relic's corresponding saint. The parchment is the only way to know what is inside the reliquary as the other pieces of crystal do not act as windows into the reliquary. While the stone creates visual harmony in its use on the vestments and trimmings, the stone itself holds great cosmological power. Most likely this material taken from Fatimid rock crystal that had been stolen and brought to the Christian world during a series of crusades and wars fought across the Mediterranean and into Fatimid societies.[38] Fatimid rock crystal was highly prized in medieval society not just for existing cosmological beliefs of purity and protection but for the purity and scarcity of the material. Rock crystal was also a material that was able to be worked by highly skilled craftsman making it an idyllic precious material used in the construction of arm reliquaries.[39]

Figure 10. *Arm Reliquary*, 13th century, Silver, silver-gilt, glass and rock crystal cabochons over wood core, 51.6 x 15.8 x 7.4cm. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464334

While materiality, time of creation, and type of reliquary can tie these three artworks together, the importance of this gesture must be noted. Arm reliquaries frequently do not represent biblical narratives, the main power of these pieces resides in the gesture of the fingers and in the materials implemented in its creation. Arm reliquaries were frequently used as public altar pieces in which they would draw in pilgrims and be seen by thousands. Each of these three reliquaries are locked permanently in the gesture of the blessing. During the Middle Ages the two most common gestures were the open hand gesture with the palm facing outwards or in this case with the fingers locked in place. The gesture of each hand while physically locked in place in sculpture serves to imply movement.[40] According to scholar Cynthia Hahn, this gesture served multiple roles within the Catholic Church during religious ceremonies and blessings. The gesture of the blessing in most cases was used during baptismal ceremonies but in some recorded cases was used to ward off or seal away evil. During this blessing there is some form of divine cosmological power that manifests itself within the arm of the saint that is then transferred into the blessed.[41] By locking these reliquaries permanently in form they embody the cosmological power of the gesture.

Hahn also touches on a point that challenges issues of validity and true power surrounding these relics inside these specific types of reliquaries. She notes that in some rare cases arm reliquaries did not contain what they are said to contain. Evidence suggests they contained bones not just from the hand or arm but other parts of the as well as contact relics. In a crude sense of the word these containers served as a sort of grab bag of holy relics and saintly accoutrement. The aspect of not knowing what is inside one's reliquary speaks to the larger argument that shaped reliquaries held unrecognized power. These pieces were prized for their beauty and material value while serving a greater importance in validating itself and what it contains. When one cannot see nor recognize what relic sits inside the piece, the reliquary becomes what an individual truly interacts with and associates the power with. Thus, when a reliquary fully encases a relic the container itself holds a new power, the power of validation. Consequently, the political and cosmological power associated with the relic are expanded as well.

9. Conclusion

The figurative reliquaries in contrast to the arm reliquaries use powerful iconography to tell their stories and portray to the viewer their own unique importance. While the Saint George piece is permanently locked in place, his body language breathes life into the artwork. The statuette depicts St. George holding a dominant position over the wounded dragon as he is ready to take the final blow. Thus, the piece serves as an allegory for the triumph of good over evil as St. George raises his sword to land the killing blow. The visual line established by his sword and the dragons head helps to create the implied motion of the sword coming down and decapitating the dragon. In contrast the reliquary of the Man of Sorrows uses individual sculptural elements added to the piece in such a way that each element projects visceral emotions and experiences for the viewer. For instance, the lifelike crown of thorns suggests pain and an

empathetic response from the viewer while the dice project a sense of shame, embarrassment or anger toward the Roman soldiers who gambled for Christs garments. The dice illustrate how visual elements of the piece help to create this sense of experientiality within the viewer, consequently evoking a deeper emotional response. The Saint Christopher statuette used visual elements to tell the legend regarding the saint and the Christ Child. The careful carving of metal to simulate waves symbolized the river, while the inclusion of the *globus cruciger* in the palm of a playful Christ denotes his divine authority. The visual elements in this piece served to illustrate the key points of the legend of St. Christopher to the observer. These figurative pieces were given as gifts to cathedrals and rulers to sit within their own private collections. Thus, goldsmiths were able to add more iconographic elements that help illustrate emotional biblical stories for the enjoyment of a single individual instead of inspiring the awe and reverence of pilgrims. In order to achieve this goal, the Catholic Church turned to the materiality and craft of arm reliquaries.

Arm reliquaries sat in public displays located in churches, monasteries, and cathedrals in order to perform miracles and inspire pilgrims. Goldsmiths focused on the implementation of precious reflective materials and an emphasis on the blessing of the *signum crucis* in order to achieve a desired effect. The gesture of the blessing was a common, yet powerful symbol used during baptismal ceremonies and to ward off and seal away evil. Consequently, the blessing held great potency and was a common feature in thirteenth century arm reliquaries while materials such as gold, silver, and rock crystal were used to reflect divine power and inspire. Thus, these precious materials were used as a way to reflect divine power through materiality as relics could not be viewed as they were encompassed within the piece.

Arm and statuette reliquaries held true power within the Holy Roman Empire that scholarship has failed to recognize. These powerful religious and political symbols were not only at the epicenter of a trade economy between wealthy nobles and highly connected individuals but were the epitome of craft within their artform. Goldsmiths labored long hours working in teams to create complex devotional pieces for pilgrim and patron alike. They implemented complex techniques and used precious materials to recreate biblical narratives packed with images of holy martyrs. Consequently, these goldsmiths not only honored their religion and their patron but imbued these pieces with liturgical and political power through fine craftsmanship, rare materials, and the use of powerful iconographic symbols, gestures, and expressions.

10. Endnotes.

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5 Ibid, 11-19.

6 In many cases the rabbit's foot would be used for polishing and smoothing pieces of metal.

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11 Ibid, Pg. 126-127.

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26 This story has become more folklore than canonical truth over time as Saint Christopher is no longer a recognized saint within Christianity.

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34 Elliott, Binns*, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Medieval Papacy,* 308.

35 Creighton M, *History of the Papacy during the Period of the Reformation*. (London: Longmans, Green, and, 1982) 302-313.

36 Arnold, Angenendt, *Treasures of Heaven: Relics and Other Sacred Artifacts*, 122.

37 The story of Saint George was wildly popular within the Middle Ages. In many cases George's triumph over the dragon is a basic allegory for the forces of good and evil. This is further emphasized by the fact that it was common to depict the devil as the dragon.

38 Markus, Hattstein and Peter Delius, *Islam: art and architecture*, (Germany: H.F. Ullmann) 172.

39 Ibid, 172.

40 Cynthia, Hahn, *What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?,* Numen 57, no. 3/4 (2010): 284-316.

41 Ibid, 284-316.