



The Stuff of Heaven Materials and Craftsmanship in Medieval Reliquaries

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In an address given at the twentieth World Youth Day in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI observed: “By inviting us to venerate the mortal remains of the martyrs and saints, the Church does not forget that, in the end, these are indeed just human bones, but they are bones that belonged to individuals touched by the living power of God. The relics of the saints are traces of that invisible but real presence which sheds light upon the shadows of the world and reveals the kingdom of heaven in our midst.” Pope Benedict’s statement touches on an important aspect of the cult of relics that has preoccupied theologians since Late Antiquity: how can human remains transmit the power of God, who is not matter but spirit? This paradox worried both critics and supporters of the cult of relics, which emerged periodically as a matter of controversy provoked by unregulated popular devotion. In the fourth century, Jerome denounced a priest who disparaged the cult of relics as superstition.¹ Five centuries later, Claudius, bishop of Turin from 817 to 827, argued that saints’ relics were no more important or holy than animal bones, a claim attacked as heresy by Jonas, bishop of Orleans (r. 818–843/44).² In the twelfth century the debate flared up again with the appearance of two theological treatises on the veneration of relics: one in favor, by Thiofrid of Echternach (d. 1110), and one against, by Guibert of Nogent (1055–1124).³ In his often quoted *Flores epytaphii sanctorum* (Flowers Strewn over the Tombs of the Saints), Thiofrid associates the veneration of relics with the Incarnation of Christ, which made matter an instrument

of salvation. He interprets relics as a means of commemorating saints who had achieved spiritual purity. To justify the Church’s lavish expenditures on saints’ tombs, and to answer critics who faulted the veneration of relics as materialistic, Thiofrid observes that relics are objects that need to be apprehended by the senses; reliquaries were thus necessary tools to reveal the spiritual power of their contents. In that respect, reliquaries served the same purpose as the bread and wine of the Eucharist: to show the nature of Christ’s presence in a way that ordinary people would find palatable: “Knowing that man cannot see and touch rotten flesh without being nauseated, he hid his body and his blood in the bread and wine, to which men are accustomed. Similarly, he has persuaded the sons of the Church to conceal and shelter the relics of the saint’s happy flesh in gold and in the most precious of natural materials so that they will not be horrified by looking at a cruel and bloody thing.”⁴

Material Splendor

Thiofrid’s statement validated a long-standing custom in church practice: the fashioning of reliquaries out of precious materials. Since the origins of the cult of relics, reliquaries had been conceived as precious containers. The riches of the reliquaries’ exteriors embodied the spiritual value of the

bits of bone and dust they contained: their material worth was equated with spiritual merit. It is not surprising, therefore, that medieval sources often describe liturgical objects, including reliquaries, in terms of their cost. For the donor, commissioning a costly reliquary was considered a sign of pious homage, but reliquaries were also conceived as capital to be used in time of trouble; veneration did not stand in the way of breaking cult images apart in order to raise capital. The Benna Cross in Mainz, for example, was cast from six hundred pounds of gold in about 983; in 1153 a foot was removed to pay for the army of Bishop Arnold. A few years later, an arm was taken by another bishop, Rudolph, to fund a trip to Rome. The remainder was melted down in 1161.⁵ The treasury of the Basilica of Saint-Denis was above all a monetary reserve to be used for the care of the poor or for maintaining the monastery in the event of severe financial need.⁶ Sometimes, the saint in question was said to have appeared in visions, commanding the guardian of his or her remains to detach parts of the relics' container to advance a particular cause.

The magnificence of precious containers awed worshipers, augmenting the appeal of the relics. Even in a secular museum setting, the sheer density of precious materials that cover many medieval reliquaries is beguiling; in their original religious and ritual context, the lure must have been irresistible. A letter written in 1125 by Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux (r. 1113–28), to his fellow monk William of Saint-Thierry, attests the ways in which precious materials could enhance the sacred quality of relics and illustrates the effect of glittering beauty on the laity: "The thoroughly beautiful image of some male or female saint is exhibited, and that saint is believed to be more holy the more highly colored the image is."⁷ "Colored" in medieval terminology refers the material riches of a variegated surface.

It follows that the appeal of glitter was also invoked to dispel any doubts about the authenticity of relics. Guibert of Nogent's treatise, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus* (On the Saints and Their Relics) is a passionate attack on unscrupulous clerics. The text is filled with examples of fraudulent relics foisted on the credulous by means of spurious or misleading inscriptions and elaborate shrines.⁸ The use of precious materials was certainly part of the process of marketing relics: the opulent display of gold reliquaries studded with gems effectively proclaimed the relic's "real" worth. This principle worked in both directions, and lack of a proper setting cast doubt on the authenticity of the relics. The chronicle of the monastery of Prüm, near Trier in Germany, records that in the ninth century a woman came to the monastery to venerate the newly translated relics of Sts. Daria and Chrysantus. Loaded with gifts, she rushed toward their tomb, but seeing that it "did not shine with gold and silver, she scorned the place" and turned around, taking her gifts with her.⁹

Medieval craftsmen exploited the rich symbolism associated with specific materials in making reliquaries to signal the sacred. Precious metals were selected not only because they were expensive and rare but also because they were thought to be pure; the smelting process used in their refinement was seen as akin to purification by fire. Precious metals were incorruptible,

moreover, like the flesh of the saints.¹⁰ Accounts of saints' lives and their miracles are filled with stories of saintly bodies being found uncorrupted, even centuries after their death; invariably these bodies gave out the sweet smell of flowers, not the stench of rotten flesh.¹¹ In the second-century account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, the saint's body appears to the bystanders as a shining vision in "gold or silver" as it is consumed by flames.¹²

Gems as well partook of a rich symbolic tradition. Medieval lapidaries—that is, treatises on minerals—built upon the tradition established by ancient authors such as Theophrastus and Pliny.¹³ Precious stones, which were defined to include organic materials such as coral and pearls, were thought to be the result of processes influenced by the stars and the astrological signs. Gems were thus considered to be alive and to contain the power associated with the cosmic events that led to their creation. From this power they drew their magical, medical, and for Christian authors, spiritual qualities. Christian lapidaries usually concentrated on the stones mentioned in the Bible, which were often compared to virtues. The English monk and historian Bede (d. 735), for example, associated jasper with the strength of the incorruptible faith, while sapphire, thought to be found in the Red Sea, signified that those who were inspired by faith could rise, intellectually at least, to celestial heights.¹⁴ Garnet was traditionally associated with compassion, while rock crystal, understood as petrified water because of its transparency, symbolized purity from sin and was often associated with Christ.

Because of the costs and labor involved in finding, mining, and processing precious stones, gems from cultures distant in both time and space were frequently reused. Sometimes, the use of Antique gems was a sign of the patron's political aspiration, but, more often, these reused objects, or *spolia*, were considered valuable for the quality of their finish and intrinsic geological characteristics.¹⁵ The Dominican friar and philosopher Albertus Magnus (d. 1280), for example, describes the marvelous designs on the cameo of the Ptolemies set into the Shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne as the result of astrological forces at work during its formation and thus a sign of the gem's power.¹⁶ Two rock crystal vessels, containing relics of the Passion of Christ and of several saints, were incorporated into the vertical shaft of the Borghorst Cross (cat. no. 77), one at the center and one at the bottom.¹⁷ The presence of the relics visible inside the transparent vessels underscores the idea of Christ's sacrifice as a source of salvation, dispensed through the water of Baptism (symbolized by the rock crystal). Moreover, the Fatimid flask's Near Eastern origin corroborated the supposed provenance of these relics, thus validating their authenticity.

One specific aspect of the symbolism of gems that was important in the creation of reliquaries was their association with saints, a common theme in exegetical literature. The sacred nature of precious stones is described in Scripture, particularly in Exodus 28:17, which enumerates the jewels on Aaron's breastplate and compares the twelve tribes of Israel to precious stones, and in Revelation 21, describing the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem,



Fig. 46. Purse reliquary of St. Stephen. Reims(?), ca. 830, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Schatzkammer (SK XIII 26)



Fig. 47. Reliquary pouch. Trier, ca. 993. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg (KG 562)

the walls of which were made of gems. In the second-century account of St. Polycarp's martyrdom, the bones of the martyr are collected and treated as if they were precious stones.¹⁸ In an eleventh-century allegorical account of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Italian theologian Bruno of Segni (d. 1123) compares precious stones to the apostles and martyrs, as does Thiofrid of Echternach in his *Flores* and Honorius of Autun (d. after 1135), a philosopher and encyclopedic writer, in his *Gemma animae*.¹⁹

These ideas informed the appearance of reliquaries. The remains of saints, considered to be "exalted and distinguished vessels of gold" (*vasa auri excelsa et eminentia*) were placed in reliquaries covered with stones, which "represented" the relics contained within.²⁰ A bejeweled purse-shaped reliquary in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (fig. 46) enshrines earth soaked with the blood of St. Stephen, while completely hiding that relic from view. At the same time it transforms a portable textile pouch, of the sort that would have been used to carry relics, like that still extant in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (fig. 47) into a glittering impenetrable box, neither portable nor accessible. Brigitte Buettner and Cynthia Hahn have discussed the complex web of paradoxes at work in this object: blood and dust were covered in gold and gems so as to advertise their "real" value, yet to the faithful the contents of the reliquary remained infinitely more precious. Indeed, they were asked to believe without seeing; perhaps, as Buettner has proposed, the precious reliquary overcame the problem of disbelief that seeing naked earth would have entailed.²¹

In addition, the cluster of stones assembled on the surface of the reliquary would have sparkled with rays of light considered to be powerful instruments of healing, possessing powers that were similar and complementary to those of saints' relics.²²

As this example makes clear, materials mediated, and even facilitated, the fusion of relics and the art-objects called upon to enshrine them. This process reached its apex at the end of the Middle Ages, and it is best illustrated in a 1487 book describing the annual exhibition of relics of the Holy Roman Empire in Nuremberg (cat. no. 125). The text accompanying the illustration of the first such exhibition gives a detailed description of their "form und gestalt" (form and appearance) and refers to the adjoining woodcut, which shows clerics holding reliquaries to the admiring gaze of the crowd, to confirm the information.²³ During the annual exhibition, the relics were not taken out of their containers but were instead shown inside their reliquaries. For the Nuremberg pilgrim, relic and reliquary were one and the same. Notwithstanding the importance of craftsmanship, to which I shall return later, the complex web of allusion established by the materials used to store relics elicited the absorption of content by the container.

Ultimately, materials contributed to the transformation of reliquaries into sculpted images like the reliquary bust of St. Baudime (cat. no. 105). Fleshed in gold and clothed in gems, the reliquary statue was a visualization of the saint as the immortal dweller in paradise, to whom the faithful directed their prayers for intercession. The understanding of this sculpture



Fig. 48. Reliquary of St. Foy. Conques, 9th century, with later additions. L'abbatiale Sainte-Foy de Conques

as a living presence was underscored by liturgical processions, in which the bust of St. Baudime like many other such reliquary busts would be paraded through town to be venerated and to dispense protection. We know from documentary sources that in the eleventh century numerous reliquary statues of saints represented their churches at the Synod of Rodez, where the famous reliquary of St. Foy also held court (fig. 48).²⁴ The precious stones that once clothed the figure of Baudime would have satisfied the requirement of variety. As an aesthetic concept, variety—in colors, material, and techniques—was an important tenet of medieval art and should be understood as a metaphor for the myriad virtues of Christ and the Holy Church.²⁵ This is also true, in the context of a saint's *Life*, where as we have seen, the virtues were often compared to gems. In his *Life*, the virtues of St. Marculph are described as "gold distinguished by diverse rows of gems,"²⁶ and the radiance that the gems emit is a metaphor for the saint's enlightened status. Thiofrid explains the saints' luminosity as "heavenly clarity," resulting from their closeness to God in paradise.²⁷

Nevertheless, all this glitter on three-dimensional sculptures left many clerics uneasy about the perils of idolatry. In the twelfth century, Church authorities sent a cleric from Chartres, Bernard of Angers, to Conques to report on the popular devotion surrounding the reliquary of St. Foy. Bernard, a skeptic at first, later acknowledged the sculpture's miraculous properties and described it as the "pious memory of the holy virgin [St. Foy]" and the emissary of the power of God as attested by the miracles that it performed.²⁸ Here, relics and materials worked together to justify an image that for all intents and purposes looked and worked like an idol.

How could this be, given Christendom's condemnation of false images? Beyond the symbolic reference to the bones of the saints, precious materials subverted the relationship between the container and its contents. The relics themselves were removed from view and reinterpreted through material associations presented by the reliquaries. For medieval Christians, unable to see the Divine with their eyes, the precious materials of reliquaries activated the *mind's* eye by presenting a vision of the sacred rather than an image of the saint. Thiofrid's characterization of reliquaries as a way to disguise the horror of actual remains should be interpreted as the dichotomy between carnal and spiritual sight, precisely as demanded by the mystery of the Eucharist, which Thiofrid adduces as an example.

Not all Christians, however, recoiled from the stark sight of holy remains. In the Byzantine East, relics were routinely displayed, and the bones themselves were adorned but not hidden from view.²⁹ The relic of the skull of St. James the Younger (fig. 49), now in the treasury of the cathedral of Halberstadt, was brought to Germany from Constantinople by its bishop, who participated in the Crusaders' sack of the Byzantine capital in 1204. The skull is adorned by silver bands that join the bones and by a plaque nailed onto the top that depicts a holy figure. Half of this plaque is unfortunately missing, but presumably it would have carried the

identification of the relics, as is the case for the skull of St. Akindinos now in the Church of Saint-Just in Arbois, France.³⁰ Such skulls would have been kept in reliquary boxes like that of St. Praxedes in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome (see p. 73, fig. 33), which could easily be opened to reveal the bones and enable them to be retrieved.³¹ The difference between the treatment of relics in East and West is perhaps best exemplified by the arm of St. George in the treasury of San Marco, brought to Venice by Doge Enrico Dandolo (r. 1195–1205) after the conquest of Constantinople. The relic arrived in Venice with its original decoration, a silver shell wrapped around the bone and open at the top with an inscription identifying the relic. In the fourteenth century, the Byzantine relic was housed in a new precious setting (cat. no. 51), which transformed the silver-clad bone into an ornate vessel, resplendent with gems, translucent enamels, and precious metals. Although the bone was still visible at the top, the Western reliquary removed the actual relic from the tactile immediacy of the Byzantine original.

The influx of relics from Byzantium into Western Europe as a result of the sack of Constantinople had a profound effect on how these valuable commodities were traded, venerated, and displayed. Reliquaries routinely began to open up to the enquiring gaze of the faithful, showing the relics contained within. The comparison between the twelfth-century arm reliquary of the apostles now at the Cleveland Museum of Art (cat. no. 41) and that made in fourteenth-century Naples and containing relics of St. Luke, now in the Musée du Louvre (cat. no. 109) is representative of this development. In the Cleveland reliquary the incorruptible bones of the saints are fleshed in gold, intended to be understood as visual manifestations of the powerful arm of the Church and as a “dispenser of power.”³²



Fig. 49. Skull relic of St. James the Younger. Byzantine (Constantinople), before 1204. Domschatzverwaltung, Halberstadt (19)

By contrast, the Louvre arm reliquary reduces the writer of the Gospel to his most significant feature, a hand holding a pen. Luke's bones are not covered in gold, but they would have been visible through the transparent rock crystal chamber that constitutes his arm. In a companion piece, also at the Louvre, containing the relic of St. Louis of Toulouse, the rock crystal is set into an architectural structure that resembles the pier of a church (fig. 50). Medieval discussions of the symbolism of church buildings often compared the saints and the apostles to pillars supporting the Church; this idea was literally embodied by burying relics within the churches' architectural structures. The Neapolitan reliquary, therefore, presents the bones of the saint as an integral support of the institution of the Church.³³

The proliferation of rock crystal reliquaries in the thirteenth century has been studied by Christof Dietrich, who compares the visible placement of actual relics inside small transparent reliquaries (see cat. nos. 77–80) to the substitution of large expanses of stained glass windows for walls in Gothic cathedrals. The transparent chambers allowed for the presentation of the relics without disturbing the saints' peace, as no manipulation was necessary. In addition, transparency permitted a higher degree of intimacy with the relics for a greater number of people. In the early Middle Ages only a handful of important people were allowed to examine the relics concealed inside reliquaries; transparent reliquaries popularized that form of engagement at a time when a more human approach to divinity was actively sought. The Gothic period saw an increased reliance on sight as a sensory perception through which God's grace could be achieved. At this time, the emergence of the science of optics stimulated discussion about the nature and the workings of man's sight. According to the Aristotelian theory of intromission, which became popular in the thirteenth century, in order to be seen, an object emitted rays that converged in the beholder's eyes.³⁴ Perception had to be processed in the brain so that knowledge could be attained: vision led to knowledge. In the earlier Middle Ages, vision implied a superimposition of archetypal images onto the world. Beginning in the thirteenth century, external reality was instead conceived as providing factual information to be processed by the subject's brain. This change meant the passage from a supernatural to a natural understanding of the world and changed the dynamic between the thing seen and the person looking at it. Late medieval optics, as Michael Camille has observed, “objectified the thing seen and ‘personalized’ the subject looking at it.”³⁵ The increased visibility of relics, partaking in these scientific developments, demonstrates a desire to apprehend divinity by looking at the relics. It subverts the attitude common in the early Middle Ages of mistrusting physical sight to privilege the mind's eye.

The shift between these different paradigms of devotion, one that hides and one that reveals, is evident in the reliquary of St. Oda in the Walters Art Museum (cat. no. 81). The presence of holes and cropped wooden pins on the backs of the Walters' reliquary and a similar panel at the British Museum (cat. no. 82) might suggest that the objects were originally the gable-ends of a twelfth-century architectural chasse containing the remains



Fig. 50. Arm reliquary of St. Louis of Toulouse. Naples, 1336–38. Musée du Louvre, Paris (OA 3254)

of Oda, a seventh-century widow from Amay (in present-day Belgium) renowned for her piety. These two ends were subsequently adapted for use as independent reliquaries in the thirteenth century. Physical evidence suggests that the relic chambers in the inner border of the Baltimore panel were added sometime after it was first fashioned into a separate reliquary.³⁶ The relic chambers are set as if they were gems; they are in fact framed in a way similar to the cabochon crystals alongside them. The cabochon settings exemplify the common practice of setting precious stones surrounded by four pearls at the corners followed by an enameled plaque. In the London and Baltimore panels, though, the pearls have been replaced by gilt silver bosses interspersed with *couvettes*, or gouged cavities, that create the illusion of a gem-studded surface.

The movement of relics from the hidden core of the reliquary to the periphery, where they take the place once occupied by gems, attests to the shift from materiality to visuality that occurred in thirteenth-century art. Where the gems had once stood metaphorically for the bones of the saints, they now yielded to the actual remains of those saints. In the Oda reliquaries, the relics are visible through thin sheets of horn, identified by red inscriptions on parchment strips, known as *authentiques*. The presence of the *authentiques* encouraged worshipers to look and thus gain knowledge of sacred presence. The evocation of the saints' names was itself a powerful intercessory mechanism, as attested by the litanies invoked during the Mass, when long lists of saints were appealed to with a series of repetitive and formulaic prayers. Thiofrid discusses the power of uttering saints' names as equal to that of the relics themselves. In the Oda shrine, then, the material of the reliquary is somewhat displaced by sight and sound. With the gems and their false settings relegated to the outer frame, the relics are hierarchically situated in relation to the central picture of Christ, serving as the real measure of the image's validity; to a certain extent, the relics authenticate the truthfulness of the image. In the later Middle Ages, relics are frequently used to frame images in painted reliquaries in which precious materials were simulated (see cat. nos. 117–120).³⁷ The Baltimore shrine, to which relics were added on the frame, shares with painted reliquaries the dependence on relics to justify "valueless" man-made image. In Christendom relics and images shared many of the same properties, and, despite protestations to the contrary in the early medieval period, they both served as a way to facilitate meditation of God.³⁸ Indeed, sometimes images were themselves relics, as is the case of the *acheiropoieton* (not made by human hands) icons of Christ (see cat. no. 113). The image of the *mandylion* was the result of an impression of Christ's face on a towel, and was thus a contact relic of Christ.³⁹ Another famous *acheiropoieton*, the celebrated icon of the *Sancta Sanctorum* at the Lateran, was reputed to have been painted in part by St. Luke and finished by angels.⁴⁰ But not all painted images could claim such lofty origins, and in order to justify their base materiality and human origins relics were often buried deep inside them or inserted around them. The faithful turned their prayers not only to the saints enshrined in the paintings but also to those portrayed on them. Thus the

relics served a double function: they were the object of veneration, but they also validated the painter's craft. If at the beginning, then, art was enlisted in the service of relics, later relics became the handmaids of art. A fourteenth-century ostensorium in the Cleveland Museum of Art (cat. no. 44) presents an interesting case of a work of art authenticated by the presence of relics. The Cleveland reliquary includes at its center a twelfth-century paten, a dish used for the bread during the celebration of the Eucharist. The ostensorium was created to display several relics, including a piece of the True Cross, visible at the top. Constructed as a miniature building, the ostensorium frames the paten as if it were the rose window of a Gothic cathedral. The center of the paten is decorated with the figure of Christ the Redeemer sitting on a rainbow and displaying the stigmata. An inscription around him confirms his role as Savior—"Be witness, I have redeemed you with my death"—and he is surrounded by symbols of the four Evangelists and personifications of the four cardinal virtues. An inscription on the outer rim refers to the transubstantiation of Christ's body into the bread of the Eucharist: "The bread which is broken in me is the body of Christ itself. He who receives it in good faith shall live in eternity." The paten was probably incorporated because of its associations with Bishop Bernward of Hildesheim (d. 1022, canonized in 1192/93), who is named as the artist on a strip of parchment visible on the back of the ostensorium (this same strip of parchment also identifies all of the relics enshrined in the reliquary) (fig. 51). In the Cleveland ostensorium, Bernward's creation not only proclaims God's mystery but is itself a relic of the saint, and this is in turn validated by the myriad relics that surround it. Indeed, due to the nature of the liturgical object, Bernward is here venerated as a *sacerdos*, a priest, who through the Holy Spirit participates in the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, but he is also celebrated as an artist. As a servant of Christ, Bernward both creates and uses the paten.

Divine Craftsmanship

The comparison implicit in the Cleveland paten between the artist and the priest marks the conclusion of a process that had begun two centuries earlier. From the ninth through the twelfth century, theologians debated the nature of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the flesh and body of Christ. Medieval commentators conceived of the priest as a participant with the Holy Spirit in that process of transformation, and the priest came to be seen as a stand-in for the Virgin Mary, a vital participant in the incarnation of Christ.⁴¹ This insistence on the role of the priest in the Eucharistic miracle led twelfth-century artists to imitate the priestly model and interpret their creative process as similar to the actions of the priest during Mass. This intellectual trend is reflected in the increasing importance of fabricated images in the liturgy and the abundance of artists' signatures on works from this period.⁴²

The presence of the Holy Spirit at the moment of artistic creation and its role as the direct cause of the artist's work are discussed by the monk Theophilus in the only extant twelfth-century manual dedicated to the making of art: *On the Various Arts*. Theophilus's treatise is unique in that it is not confined to instructions for making tools and mixing paint, but also gives significant attention to the role and mission of the craftsman. Indeed, Theophilus's book is an invitation to his fellow monks to exercise their manual skills, through which they could exercise their right to knowledge. Theophilus understands artistic talent as an "inherited right," which man maintained despite his fall from grace. Man could regain his likeness to God only if this right was studiously exercised. According to Theophilus, the craftsman who sets out to decorate the house of God is filled with the sevenfold spirit.⁴³ As John van Engen has noted, according to Theophilus, the ideal craftsman possesses all seven gifts of the spirit, as did, according to other theologians, Christ himself.



Fig. 51. Reverse of ostensorium with "Paten of St. Bernward" (cat. no. 44). German (Lower Saxony), 12th/14th century. The Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund with additional gift from Mrs. R. Henry Norweb (1930.505)

Theophilus classifies the craftsman's knowledge as his capacity to arrange his creation according to order, variety, and measure. This characterization is borrowed from Scripture, where God "ordered all things by measure, number and weight" (Wisdom 11:21) and implicitly compares the work of the craftsman with that of God. The idea is steeped in twelfth-century commentaries on Genesis. Theologians such as William of Conches (ca. 1090–after 1154), Abelard (1079–1142), and Thierry of Chartres (d. ca. 1150) sought to understand the mystery of Creation through reason rather than solely through the weight of received authority. According to Anselm of Bec, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 1109), God's Creation is supremely rational and hence it is open to man's rational understanding, since man was created in God's own image. This climate of "intellectual confidence," to use R. W. Hanning's term, fostered an appreciation of human creativity as a microcosm of God's creation and led to the widespread use of the metaphor of God as artist.⁴⁴ William of Conches in his gloss on Plato's *Timaeus* writes: "for as a craftsman wishing to make something first arranges it in his mind and afterward, having procured material, forms it according to his idea, so the creator before he was to create anything, had an idea of it in his mind and thereafter performed it if by his act."⁴⁵ The comparison of the artist and God elevated the value of the craftsman in intellectual circles by giving philosophical and rational dignity to the process through which artifacts were created. Indeed the *artifex* had to proceed with "the confidence of a full mind" as Theophilus so elegantly proclaimed.

This is particularly true in the writings of Hugh of Saint-Victor (1096–1141) and Rupert of Deutz (d. 1135), both of whom, like Theophilus, recognized the value of the mechanical arts as gifts proceeding from the Holy Spirit and as instruments in the combat against vice. In his guide to the arts, titled *Didascalicon*, Hugh discusses the works of God, of Nature, and of the artist/craftsman imitating Nature; he argues that the role of man as maker is to overcome his fallen state by turning the work of nature to his use. So does Rupert of Deutz in his work dedicated to the Trinity.⁴⁶ Hugh, Rupert, and Theophilus elevate the mechanical arts to the level of other intellectual faculties engaged in achieving wisdom. Furthermore these authors emphasize the capacity of craftsmanship to inspire awe. Hugh discusses how, driven by need, man had to find "all that is most excellent in the occupation of man: "from this [want] the infinite varieties of painting, weaving, carving, and founding have arisen, so that we look with wonder not at nature alone but at the artificer as well."⁴⁷ This idea is clearly expressed by Theophilus too, when he claims that the work of craftsmen can lift the soul toward God, causing the faithful: "to praise God the creator in this creation and to proclaim him marvelous in his works."

The above discussion provides the background for the creation of the Cleveland ostensorium. In the fourteenth century, Bernward's holiness was celebrated through his art, and his work was enshrined as a relic. The resulting reliquary draws attention to an important shift beginning in the twelfth century, in the understanding of the making of art, and in particular of the nature of craftsmanship as a source of wonder and awe.

Workmanship now partook of some of the same wondrous qualities that were previously associated with precious material. Ovid's remark that craftsmanship sometimes surpassed material worth (*materiam superabat opus*) was often invoked in medieval descriptions of works of art not only to justify extravagance but also to record genuine wonderment at precious craftsmanship.

That the value of artistry was considered to be equal to that of the material is attested by numerous instances of metalworkers offering the labor of their craft to God, as a patron would offer to underwrite the expenses required to carry out their commissions. In a marvelous example of book binding, Hugo of Oignies portrays himself accompanied by an inscription that compares his work as a goldsmith with his labor as a scribe offering both as prayers to God: "The book is written outside and inside. Hugo wrote it inside painfully and outside with his hands, pray for him, some sing the praise of God with the voice, Hugo sings it with his craft as a goldsmith painfully laboring over his work" (fig. 52).⁴⁸

The meaning of Hugo's inscription has been the subject of debate, particularly in regard to the extent of Hugo's active participation as a scribe.⁴⁹ But what is clear is the value placed on the goldsmith's skill as a gesture of veneration and as a means of praising God, precisely as Theophilus would have in his manual.

Hugo left many signed works. One of these is the reliquary of the rib of St. Peter, now in the treasury of Oignies in the Convent of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Namur (cat. no. 112). A strip of parchment inserted in the vessel containing the relics records that the reliquary was made by brother Hugo in 1238. The rock crystal tube containing the relics is mounted onto an arch of metal shaped like a rib and adorned with silver filigree in the form of an inhabited scroll. The rib-shaped support is itself elevated on a foot similar to the foot of a chalice or cross. The little crystal vessel contains a sliver of a bone that cannot be immediately identified as any specific part of a body. Instead, the nature of this fragment is identified by Hugo's rib-shaped flowering silver creation. The immediacy of Hugo's interpretation is at odds with the appearance of the actual relic yet it illustrates the whole relic, interpreting the fragment for the viewer. The incorruptibility of St. Peter's flesh is symbolized by the flowering nature of Hugo's imagined bone. Borrowing a parallel from twelfth-century literature, it is possible to understand Hugo's creation as an *integumentum*, a rhetorical device used by twelfth-century humanists to justify pagan literature. It is best explained as a fictional narrative intended as an ornate covering for hidden truths. The poet Bernard Silvestris (ca. 1085–1178) explained in his *Cosmographia*: "the integumentum is a type of exposition that wraps the apprehension of the truth in a fictional narrative and thus it is also called a cover."⁵⁰ In the same way, Hugo's rib reliquary disguises the real relic and presents a visionary image of that poor bit of bone. Just as the poet is the purposeful creator of the literary *integumentum*, charged with leading readers to discover hidden truths, so here Hugo constructs an image of the sacred, which simultaneously hides and reveals the truth.⁵¹



Fig. 52. Gospel Book with Christ in Majesty. Binding by Hugo of Oignies, ca. 1230. Trésor d'Hugo d'Oignies, Couvent des Soeurs de Notre-Dame, Namur

From the beginnings of Christianity the makers of reliquaries were charged with shaping the sacred. In so doing they slowly discovered that their art could rival nature. With this in mind, it is worth pondering whether the explosion of new forms of reliquaries, particularly body-part

reliquaries that became so popular in the twelfth century, should not perhaps be attributed in part to a renewed confidence in the value of craftsmanship to reveal God's presence.