

THE DOMESTICATION OF AN ITINERANT OBJECT: THE TRUE CROSS RELIQUARY FROM THE LOUVRE MUSEUM

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Abstract: The Reliquary of the True Cross from the Louvre Museum serves as a good illustration of some key ideas which are of high interest for modern art historians studying medieval art. These ideas are: hybridity (syncretism, compositeness), portability (mobility), circulation, and transparency (crossing borders). The Reliquary is a product of a complicated cross-cultural exchange with more than one participant. First of all, it is a composite, or hybrid, object. The cross-shaped reliquary was produced in the Holy Land in the twelfth century, most likely in Jerusalem, while the casket, in which the cross is housed, was produced later, probably in a South Italian or Sicilian workshop of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Furthermore, the reliquary belongs to a big family of portable objects, which are defined by the feature of portability, and which add to its material value significant symbolical value when they are transported beyond the borders – geographical, cultural, or political – of the region of their production. In order to better understand the reliquary and its value, I answer two sets of questions. First is the set of “traditional” questions of Western European art history, namely authorship, style, date, and periodization. Then I consider this reliquary as an “object without borders,” in terms of Jennifer Purtle, and find answers to the kinds of questions related to the specificity of portable objects: What is the object within the context in which it exists? How and why does an object move beyond borders? What meaning and what cultural and economic value accrue to an object when it exists without borders? Answering these questions, I show how the reliquary moved from one cultural and political context to another, being re-shaped and re-considered on the course of its travels.

Keywords: Compositeness, Holy Land, Hybridity, Medieval art, Portability, Reliquary, Syncretism, Transparency, True Cross.

The Reliquary of the True Cross (figs. 1, 2, 3) from the Louvre Museum serves as a very good illustration of key ideas which are of high interest for art historians studying medieval art. These ideas are: hybridity (syncretism, compositeness), portability (mobility), circulation, and crossing borders (transparency).

The object is a product of a complicated cross-cultural exchange with more than one participant. It belongs to a big family of portable objects, which, according to Eva Hoffman,

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are defined “not by the style and subjects represented on these works, but rather by the circumstances of portability, shifting the emphasis from ‘production’ to ‘circulation’.”¹ In order to better understand the reliquary and its value, I find it necessary to answer two sets of questions. First is the set of “traditional” questions of Western European art history, as Eva Hoffman calls them, namely authorship, style, date, and periodization.² Then I will consider this reliquary as an “object without borders,” and find answers to the kinds of questions asked by Jennifer Purtle: What is the object within the context in which it exists? How and why does an object move beyond borders? What meaning and what cultural and economic value accrue to an object when it exists without borders?³

The catalogue entry of the Louvre Museum informs us that the reliquary is of Italian provenance and was produced in the late 12th century CE. It was first published by Marquet de Vasselot in 1914, and was described as an Italian work of art based on a Byzantine model.⁴ Recently, however, Anastasia Wasserman challenged this identification. In her opinion, the reliquary is of Byzantine provenance.⁵ For me the most plausible theory is that of Jannic Durand, the curator of Medieval Art at the Louvre Museum. He describes the reliquary as a *composite*, or *hybrid* object. The cross reliquary itself, he argues, “belongs to a well-defined group of reliquary crosses produced in the Holy Land in the 12th century, most likely in Jerusalem.” The casket, in which the cross is housed, was produced later and should be attributed to a South Italian or Sicilian workshop of the late 12th or early 13th century.⁶ The difficulties in identification clearly demonstrate that for this type of artwork, the object’s portability and movement across borders, both geographical and cultural, is more important for defining the object, than the place of its production.⁷

The smaller cross reliquary (see fig. 1) is made in the shape of the Byzantine cross with two horizontal arms and is covered with repoussé and stamped silver. On the front, there are the slivers of the True Cross, arranged to form two crosses at the intersection of the arms. Four tiny fragments of stone are placed around a central relic. Jannic Durand suggests that they are relics from one or more holy sites in Palestine, such as, for instance, the Holy Sepulchre, or Calvary, or the Cave of Nativity.⁸ Thus, the cross represents the composite type of reliquary, with the main relic and the secondary relics exposed for easy viewing by the faithful.⁹ The rest of the decoration of the frontal side of the cross consists of four medallions with the symbols of the Evangelists, an image of an angel, and vegetal motifs. On the bottom part of the cross a domed structure with rectangular base is depicted. It is traditionally

¹ Hoffman, 2001, 17.

² Hoffman, 2001, 17.

³ Purtle, 2009, 131.

⁴ de Vasselot, 1914, 7.

⁵ Wasserman, 2015, 25 (footnote 32).

⁶ Durand, 2006, 680-681.

⁷ Hoffman, 2001, 17.

⁸ Durand, 2006, 680.

⁹ Verdier, 1982, 95.

interpreted as an image of the Holy Sepulchre, with an oil lamp hanging from the vertex.¹⁰ Wasserman argues that this combination of the image of the Holy Sepulchre with the cross is an indicator of the emergence of a new iconographical type of the reliquaries of the True Cross originating from Crusaders' encounter with the *loca sancta* in Jerusalem. Crusader reliquaries developed from Byzantine *staurothekai*, containers for preserving the wood of the True Cross; and, like their prototypes, these reliquaries preserve the shape of a cross with two horizontal arms. The back of the cross (fig. 4) is decorated with a vegetal motif and a central medallion of *Agnus Dei*, the reference being to Christ's sacrifice. The decorative program of the cross reliquary, with symbols of four Evangelists, angels, *Agnus Dei*, and vegetal motifs, was, according to Wasserman, typical for crusader reliquaries.¹¹

The other part of the reliquary, namely the casket (figs. 2 and 3), was, in Durand's opinion, made later. It is a flat box (or *tabula*) with a sliding lid, which allows access to the *staurotheka*. This shape also derived from Byzantine reliquaries shaped like icons painted on wooden panels scooped out like a trough (fig. 5). As Verdier notes, this similarity of form explains why reliquaries of this type were sometimes registered in medieval inventories and texts under the Latin word *icone* (*ycona*).¹² The lid bears an image of the Crucifixion with the Virgin Mary and St John at the foot of the cross, which is a direct allusion to the relic protected within. The cross divides the field of the image into four parts. The four-partite composition is of great symbolic significance in Christian visual language. It refers to four parts of the world, the four rivers of Paradise, four virtues, and etcetera. This type of composition was very popular throughout the Christian world, and may be found on various media in different regions far beyond the Mediterranean (see figs. 6-10). When the case is opened, it reveals the parallel scene with images of St Helena, traditionally credited with the invention of the True Cross, and her son Constantine, the first Christian emperor. As Durand notes, "[t]he parallel is heightened by a depiction of two angels in adoration above the cross in both scenes."¹³ The double portrait of St Helena and Emperor Constantine was also very popular and may be found on different media (see fig. 11). Finally, Durand describes the underside of the casket as bearing a *crux gemmata* rising from acanthus leaves.¹⁴

Overall, Byzantine reliquaries in *tabula* shape were very popular in the Christian world (see figs. 12, 13). However, there is an inscription on the casket which suggests that the reliquary came from Southern Italy or Sicily. The inscription along the outer border reads: +HOC EST LIGNVM: S(AN)C(T)E CRVCIS IN QVA XPC [CHRISTVS] PEPE(N)DIT / QVAM DE IERVSALE(M) + CONSTANTINVS ET HELENA DETVLERVNT; in the interior of the case: S(AN)C(TV)S CONSTANTINVS KONCTA(ν)TIN(O)ς and S(AN)C(T)A HELENA HAIIA EAENI; illegible letters near the archangels Gabriel and Michael; on the lid: I STAVROSIS, IHS XPS / IC XC; on the

¹⁰ Durand, 2006, 680.

¹¹ Wasserman, 2015, 15, 25.

¹² Verdier, 1982, 100.

¹³ Durand, 2006, 680.

¹⁴ Durand, 2006, 680.

underside of the case: *HIEROTHE/CA*.¹⁵ As Durand points out, “[t]he Byzantine style iconography and the mix of Greek and Latin letters and wording tend to favour an attribution to an Italian workshop of the 12th century or the first half of the 13th century, perhaps located in Southern Italy or Sicily.”¹⁶

To summarize, the reliquary of the True Cross from the Louvre Museum is a composite object, which combines at least three cultural traditions: Byzantine, Crusader, and South Italian/Sicilian. The specificity of reliquaries, as containers for sacred relics, was that additionally to the value of the precious materials of which they were made, these objects had hardly quantifiable symbolic value of sacred objects. The value of reliquaries was *composite*, defined by a combination of complex social, cultural, and religious interactions.¹⁷ Describing the distribution of Byzantine relics in Western Christendom, Holger A. Klein argues that maintenance and control over the relics allowed Byzantine emperors a way to express their close ties with divine powers and their spiritual superiority over other Christian rulers.¹⁸ This statement can arguably be extended to include the distribution of relics by the rulers of the Latin Kingdom. This means that these objects acquired their full value, both economic and symbolic, only by being transported outside the place of their production. In other words, they were itinerant by nature, and were made to cross boundaries. It is not less important that for the new owners of the reliquary, be it a person or an institution, it was not enough to own the object. It was necessary to make the fact of possession visible. As a result, the iconography of the object itself changed, and a new casket was made, which tied the reliquary to its new location visually and symbolically. This practice was popular in Western Europe. There are several famous examples of the “domestication” of an itinerant reliquary by making a new container for it (see figs. 14, 15), including the Stavelot Triptych (fig. 15). On the other hand, one cannot cross out another possibility: that, having acquired a new casket and new layers of symbolic meaning, the reliquary continued in circulation until it finally settled in the museum setting and now is recontextualized as a ‘work of art’.¹⁹

¹⁵ Durand, 2006, 680.

¹⁶ Durand, 2006, 681.

¹⁷ Klein, 2004, 283.

¹⁸ Klein, 2004, 284.

¹⁹ Hoffman, 2001, 17.

Illustrations

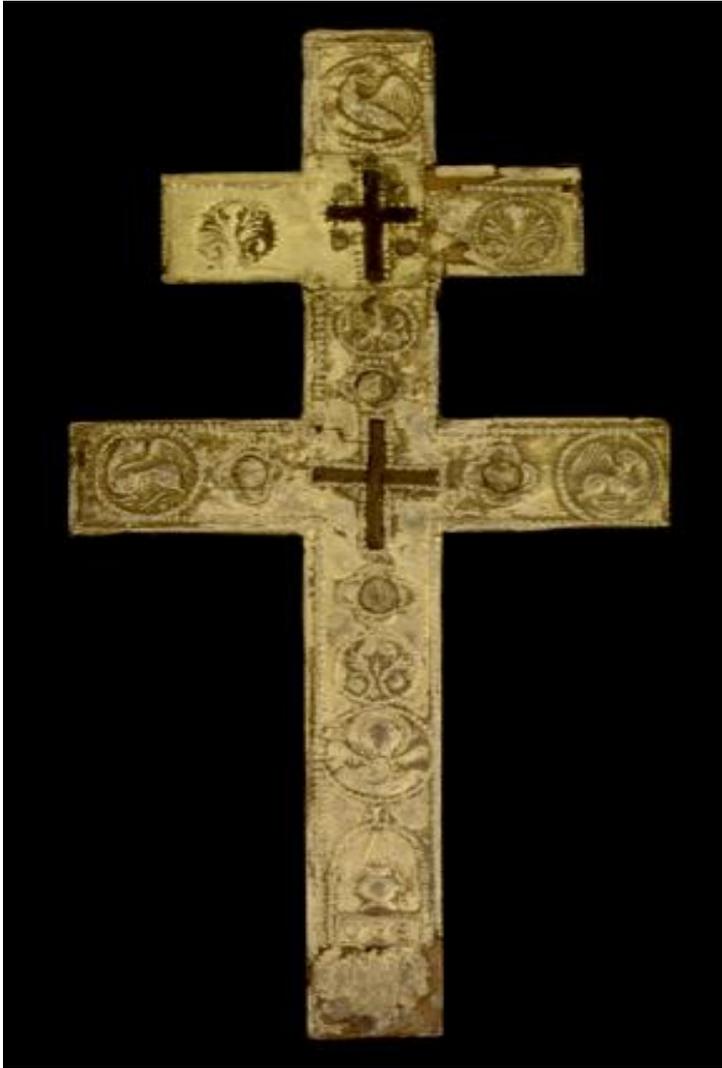


Fig. 1. Reliquary of the True Cross.

Source: Andaloro, Maria (ed). *Nobiles Officinae: Perle, Filigrane e Trame di Seta dal Palazzo Reale di Palermo*. Vol. 1. Sicily, Palermo: Giuseppe Maimone Editore, 2006; p. 288.



Fig. 2. Reliquary of the True Cross, the casket with the lid closed

Source: Official web-site of the Louvre Museum:

http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=obj_view_obj&objet=cartel_5296_7101_ov012724.002.jpg_obj.html&flag=true, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 3. Reliquary of the True Cross (with the lid open)

Source: Official web-site of the Louvre Museum:

http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=obj_view_obj&objet=cartel_5296_6623_ov012724.003.jpg_obj.html&flag=false, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 4. Reliquary of the True Cross, back of the smaller cross

Source: Official web-site of the Louvre Museum:

http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=obj_view_obj&objet=cartel_5297_6625_ov012724.004.jpg_obj.html&flag=true, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 5. Reliquary of the True Cross.

Source: Official web-site of the Louvre Museum:

http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=obj_view_obj&objet=cartel_5297_6625_ov012724.004.jpg_obj.html&flag=true, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 6. Enamel from Conques with the Crucifixion, date ca. 1100.

Source: Official web-site of the Metropolitan Museum:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/474207>, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 7. Book Cover with Byzantine Icon of the Crucifixion, date ca. 1000.

Source: Official web-site of the Metropolitan Museum:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/464015>, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 8. Gospel Book Fragments (late 7th century), Durham Cathedral, MS A.II.10. Crucifixion, fol. 38v. FADIS (Federated Academic Imaging System)

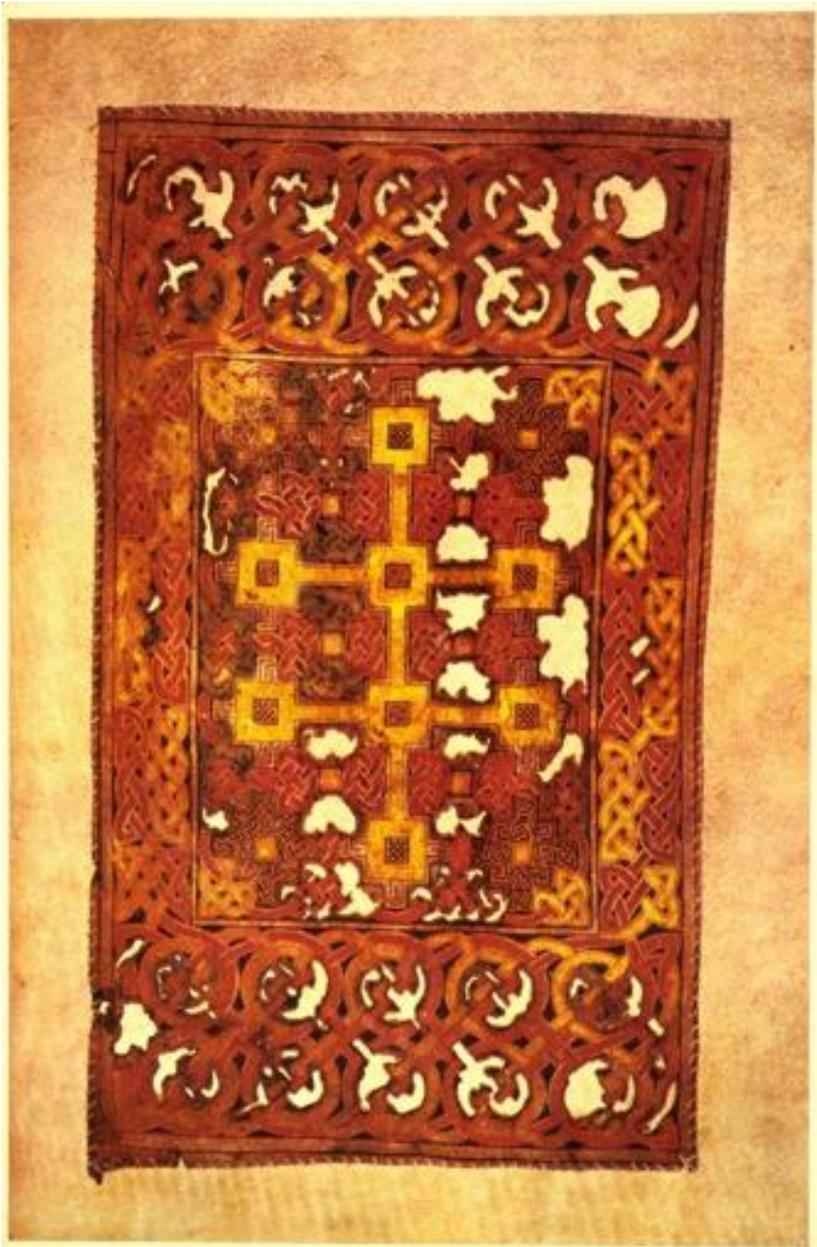


Fig. 9. Book of Durrow (late 7th century), Trinity College, MS 57, Carpet page with double-armed cross, fol. 1v. FADIS (Federated Academic Imaging System)



Fig. 10. Book of Kells (late 8th – early 9th century), Trinity College, MS 58 (A.I.6). The eight circle cross page, fol. 33r. FADIS (Federated Academic Imaging System)



Fig. 11. The Fieschi Morgan Stauerotheke with double portrait of St Helena and Constantine (date: early 9th century). Geography: Made in Constantinople (?) Medium: Gilded silver, gold, enamel worked in cloisonné, and niello.

Source: Official site of the Metropolitan Museum, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/472562?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=constantine+and+helena&pos=2>, accessed October 17, 2015.



**Fig. 12. *Staurotheke* (date: ca. 1100), Geography: Made in Constantinople; Medium: Gilded silver; Hermitage State Museum, St. Petersburg
Source: <http://rublev-museum.livejournal.com/43593.html>**



Fig. 13. Tesoro delle Sante Croci in the duomo vecchio of Brescia (late 10th century), *Rivista dell'Osservatorio per le Arti Decorative in Italia*,

Source: http://www1.unipa.it/oadi/oadiriv/?page_id=774, accessed October 17, 2015



Fig. 14. Reliquary of the True Cross. Cross: Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem; panel: Rhine-Meuse region. Date: 1214. Material: Silver, silver gilt over wood (walnut), precious stones, niello
Source: Official web-site of the Cleveland Museum of Art, <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1952.89>, accessed October 18, 2015



Fig. 15. Triptych from the Abbey of Stavelot. The two small triptychs in the center: Byzantine, date: from the late 11th or early 12th century. The larger triptych: Mosan, date: 1156-1158.
Source: Official web-site of the Morgan Library and Musrum, <http://www.themorgan.org/search/site/Triptych%20from%20the%20Abbey%20of%20Stavelot>, accessed October 18, 2015.

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