In spite of their very distinct purpose—to shelter and embellish a relic—reliquaries from the early centuries of Christianity were made from a variety of materials, and their patrons and makers were not obliged to follow any specific form or size. They thereby differ from other objects with a well-defined function, such as censers, chalices, or book covers, in that they do not make up a coherently configured and easily distinguishable group. Dependent on the wealth of the individual patron and whether reliquaries were shaped as, for example, a casket, cylindrical box, sarcophagus, flask or cross, these containers could be made of stone, lead, terracotta, glass, wood, ivory, and of various precious metals like gold or silver, or combinations thereof. While hiding their relics from view, some reliquaries during this period were adorned with precious stones and with images or symbols while others were left completely aniconic.1

Reliquaries depend on the cult and circulation of relics. Although the earliest evidence of Christian relic veneration goes back to the middle of the second century, when the bones of St Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, were deemed “more precious than precious stones, and finer than gold,” a cult of martyrs and, by extension, of their relics had to wait until the middle of the third century when numerous witnesses of Christ died for their faith during the empire-wide persecutions of Christians.2 Shortly thereafter, the legalization of Christianity in 313 gradually paved the way for a publicly sponsored cult of martyrs so that, by the end of the century and the beginning of the next, the areas of the dead outside the walls of late antique towns were given unprecedented priority through the building of monumental shrines and pilgrimage sites. The earliest reliquaries are from this period. Yet, the fact that they can be traced back to a wide variety of shrines and sites across the Christian world should not lead us to believe that the cult and circulation of relics during this period unfolded smoothly and with the same intensity everywhere. In fact, whereas the cult of relics was initiated in the East, it did not encounter the same degree of attention and diversity as in the Latin West. At the same time, very few Byzantine reliquaries have survived before Iconoclasm in the ninth century. The best way to glean an overall picture of the cult of relics and reliquaries is therefore to give priority to the West where the material and written evidence is quite substantial. A good starting point for this endeavor is Saint Ambrose who was bishop of Milan from 374–397.3
Ambrose of Milan and the San Nazaro reliquary

Among the earliest and best-known reliquaries is the silver casket found in 1578 under the main altar of the church of San Nazaro in Milan. The cube-shaped box (Figure 10.1) is believed to have contained relics of some of the apostles, possibly of John, Andrew, and Thomas, to whom the church was originally dedicated (Basilica Apostolorum) in 386 by Ambrose. Perhaps commissioned by the Milanese bishop himself for the occasion, the silver casket stands out for its figurative repoussé imagery that, in addition to the lid, which features an enthroned Christ surrounded by the twelve apostles, shows the Judgment of Daniel (front?), the Adoration of the Magi (back?) and the Judgment of Solomon and the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace. Contrary to what one might expect, the images do not explicitly refer to any of the individual apostle martyrs represented inside by virtue of their scarce corporeal remains. Instead, the biblical scenes, which might seem randomly chosen at first, gather around the general theme of Christian salvation as foreshadowed during the Old Law and realized through the coming of Christ. The imagery’s generic nature with respect to the relics they envelop is far from unusual for reliquaries of this period, which were dictated by neither any particular iconography nor type of imagery, whether narrative or iconic.4

The physical need for a precious reliquary, such as the one from San Nazaro, that contains relīquā, leftover bits of bodies of martyrs, is directly tied to two fundamental circumstances: 1) the leftover bits of the martyrs must carry some kind of value, and 2) to encase and embellish them, their bodies first needed to be dismembered for translation and circulation beyond their original resting places, the tombs, where, as the sixth-century bishop Gregory of Tours put it, “there should be no doubt that the saints are present.”5

Value of relics

As far as we know, Victricius, bishop of Rouen and a friend of Ambrose of Milan, was the first to attempt a theological explanation of what had already been affirmed by several Christians: relics of saints had healing and intercessory faculties and were thus in possession of the virtus, the virtue or power, of the holy person from which they derived. In a sermon through which Victricius thanked Ambrose for sending him relics of saints, he also argued that the healing

Figure 10.1 Silver casket, San Nazaro, Milan. Late 4th century. Photo: Diocesan Museum of Milan.
Erik Thunø

power of relics “is no less in the parts than in the entirety.” In this way, the relic of a saint was the saint. Just as the bread and wine of the eucharist contained the real presence of God, so too did the relic contain the real presence of the saint. Furthermore, the division of relics contributed to making them objects of devotion in their own right. The late fourth-century Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa said of them:

Those who behold them embrace, as it were, the living body in full flower: they bring eye, mouth, ear, all the senses into play, and then, shedding tears of reverence and passion, they address to the martyr their prayers of intercession as though he were present. 

No wonder why Ambrose chose a casket of precious silver to authenticate the sacred importance of his newly acquired relics and, more specifically, a pictorial program that revolves around the power of God. Indeed, image and relic work in reciprocal ways that are meaningful to both the relic and its imagery: through their healing powers, the relics share in the divine heavenly power that, as visualized on the casket, had descended on earth through Christ. In this way, the imagery makes the tiny disembodied bits of bone significant, alive, and even more precious than the material silver that embellishes them. Since their healing power is no less significant “in the parts than in the entirety,” it also follows that the relics are the apostles (the church of San Nazaro’s dedicatees) who are simultaneously present on earth and in heaven. Conversely, the miracle-working relics inside the silver box are physical proof of the claim made by the imagery that God had finally come to be among men. Clearly, the relics alone cannot convey such complex theological contents. They need the reliquary, and its images, to mediate between them and their audiences.

Dismemberment, translation and circulation of relics

In 386—the same year in which Ambrose installed the apostle relics in his reliquary—an imperial ruling, issued at Constantinople, had reaffirmed Roman tradition that bodies of the dead (including bodies of martyrs) were not to be moved, divided or marketed. Ambrose of Milan was the first church leader in the Latin West to clearly ignore those stipulations. Since no apostle lay buried in Milan, the remains of any apostle inside the reliquary from San Nazaro had to be translated from their original resting place by the fourth-century bishop. In this way, Ambrose’s actions were similar to (and inspired by) those of the earliest emperors residing in Constantinople. Clearly the latter’s deeds had become known in the West because Paulinus, bishop of Nola south of Naples, wrote in the early fifth century that Emperor Constantine the Great “removed Andrew [the apostle] from the Greeks and Timothy [the apostle] from Asia; and so Constantinople now stands with twin towers, vying to match the hegemony of great Rome . . . for he counterbalanced Peter and Paul with a protection as great, since Constantinople gained the disciple of Paul and the brother of Peter.” In reality, this famous translation of the apostles took place, not under Constantine, but his son and successor, Constantius II, in 356–357, and also included the apostle Luke.

The translation of the three bodies to the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, a city without martyrs, serves as key evidence that the fragmentation and translation of relics—and hence of violation of the tombs of the martyrs—first began in the East. However, whereas not a single body is recorded to have been moved from its original resting place before 350, it became common practice by 400 in both East and West. Victricius defended the dissemination of relics on theological grounds by arguing that relics, whose healing power “is no less in the parts than in the entirety,” should circulate as widely as possible in order to “distribute
Reliquaries and the cult of relics

benefactions” and create faith, equality and unity among Christians. Paulinus echoes that sentiment in saying that since the faith had not initially spread evenly throughout the entire world, many areas were without martyrs and therefore Christ had given authorization to “summon martyrs from their earlier homes and translate them to fresh lodgings on earth.” Yet, in the case of Constantius’ translation of the apostles, Paulinus offers an additional and far more prosaic motivation, namely that of rivalry with the city of Rome which, to the jealousy of any Christian city, was loaded with Christian martyrs, not to mention the apostle princes. Indeed, the same is true for Ambrose’s translation that conspicuously resembles that of Constantius, not only with regard to the type of relics translated, but also to the church that was built to shelter them. In terms of both its dedication and cross plan, Ambrose’s church made obvious allusions to the Constantinopolitan church of the Holy Apostles. In so doing, Ambrose made Milan compete with Constantinople, and additionally, just like the Byzantine emperors, he may have aimed, albeit indirectly, at rivaling Rome, the Eternal City.

Paulinus’ account of Emperor Constantius’ relic translation immediately follows his defense of Ambrose’s most famous translation, which is not that of the three apostles to the Basilica Apostolorum, but of the local protomartyrs of Gervasius and Protasius. In a letter to his sister Marcellina, Ambrose wrote how, after having built the suburban Basilica Ambrosiana for himself, the people of Milan had requested: “Consecrate this as you did the Roman basilica [the Basilica Apostolorum]. I will, I said, if I find relics of martyrs.” And so he did: On June 17, 386, Ambrose went to the martyr shrine of Saints Felix and Nabor and unearthed the two protomartyrs’ bodies which were “of wondrous stature . . . the bones were all intact and there was much blood.” After two days, he moved them into his new basilica and placed them under the altar, where his own sarcophagus was to have stood. Ambrose’s pioneering effort lies not in the translation itself which, as we have seen, he had already undertaken a few months earlier at the Basilica Apostolorum. Instead the novelty was that this time he transferred some of the city’s own martyrs, taking them out of a graveyard dotted with other martyr tombs and giving them a clear focus by linking them to the communal liturgy in a public church built by the bishop himself and in which he would frequently preside. This process has famously been rendered in metaphorical terms as an electrician’s rewiring of an antiquated wiring system in order that more power pass through better insulated wires toward the bishop.

In his letter to Marcellina, Ambrose also provided one of the earliest justifications for placing the martyr relics under the altar, a practice that soon became a commonality among both suburban and urban churches: “Let these triumphant victims be brought to the place where Christ is the victim. But he upon the altar, who suffered for all; they beneath the altar, who were redeemed by his passion.” The celebration of the eucharist thereby unites the martyrdom and triumph of the saints with the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. Finally, Ambrose was also the first to name the local martyrs “patrons,” thus alluding to their protective role of the community. In this way, the new city patrons served both to build a new and stronger Christian identity for the city of Milan and, by linking the relics to the altar, to strengthen the bishop’s role as mediator of the sacred.

Rome and its early martyrs

Ambrose’s interest in the martyrs of his city had also gained currency elsewhere, in particular in Rome, where Pope Damasus (366–384) only a few years earlier had begun to rediscover some of the numerous martyrs buried in the catacombs encircling the walls of the city. Hence, at no less than eighteen separate sites, Damasus renovated a series of tombs by providing them with more accessible settings. He also embellished them with monumental and beautifully carved metrical
verse inscriptions, the so-called Damasian epigrams, which—just like a precious reliquary—served to enhance the value of the martyrs’ bones often by reference to their earthly deeds and simultaneous presence in both the tomb and heaven (Figure 10.2). In honor of the Roman martyrs Felicissimus and Agapitus, who were deacons under Pope Sixtus II (257–258) and beheaded during Emperor Valerian’s Christian persecution in 258, Damasus wrote:

Behold! This tomb, too, preserves the celestial limbs of saints whom suddenly the palace of heaven snatched up. These, at once comrades and attendants of the unconquered cross, imitating both the model and the faith of their holy bishop, won an aetherial home and the realms of the righteous. The singular glory of the Roman people rejoices in them because with Sixtus as their leader at the time they merited Christ’s triumphs. For Felicissimus and Agapitus, the holy martyrs, Damasus the bishop made (this).

Damasus’ celebration of the martyrs in this fashion created nothing less than a milestone in the cult of martyrs in Rome and the Christian world in general. Certainly by the time Damasus was elected to the Holy See, a series of large funerary basilicas placed on top of or adjacent to the martyrs’ graves (i.e., Sant’Agnese, San Lorenzo fuori le Mura and St Peter’s) had already been constructed a few decades earlier and begun to change the city’s suburban landscape. Yet, the sheer range and number of martyrs made known and promoted by the fourth-century bishop was unprecedented. By renovating and facilitating access to the martyrs’ graves along the main roads leading into the *Urbs*, Damasus contributed substantially to the remapping of Rome’s sacred landscape outside the walls and gave the popular and episcopal cult of martyrs’ relics a significant boost. Thanks to Damasus, whom the *Book of Pontiffs* (*Liber Pontificalis*), compiled in the 530s and 540s, still remembered as the impresario of the Roman saints, Rome had become the city of martyrs by the end of the fourth century.

The Damasian enterprise of taking the shrine to where the remains of martyrs lay buried rather than dislocating those remains to a new shrine, as exemplified by Bishop Ambrose, testifies to the acceptance of Roman law, which, as mentioned above, dictated that the tombs of the dead remain inviolable. Hence, when Emperor Justinian wrote to Pope Hormisdas in 519 to ask for relics of the apostles and of St Lawrence, as would have been the practice in the East, the pope rejected the request and replied that he had instead sent *sanctuaria*—not corporeal remains, but objects (presumably cloth) that had been in touch with the tombs of the apostles and thus absorbed some of their sanctity. In short, the Emperor had to content himself with what are also called “secondary relics” because they had only touched but were not part of the revered

![Figure 10.2](image-url)
Reliquaries and the cult of relics

body. The same happened a few years later, in 594, when Byzantine Empress Constantina, wife of Maurice, asked Pope Gregory for the head of St Paul, but received only sanctified cloth in return. This policy, which endured until the seventh century, kept the rest of Europe in poor supply of relics while Rome, on the other hand, remained a power house of untouched martyrs and, consequently, an international center of pious tourism.24

Seen in this perspective, Ambrose of Milan’s attitude towards the martyrs was completely at odds with Damasus’ law-obeying scheme. Are we, then, dealing with two different approaches of the late fourth century that can only be seen as in conflict with one another? Yes and no. Although often presented as clear opposites, each represents a different side of the same coin: the ambition to obtain episcopal control of the martyrs. Hence, whether or not the latter were left in situ or had been moved from elsewhere, they were the key elements in the new wiring system through which more power could flow directly to the bishop. Whereas Damasus was the first to realize this scheme by working within the law, Ambrose was the more innovative in applying the translation habits of the East that were at odds with ancient burial customs. In doing so, as testified by the silver casket from San Nazaro, he initiated a practice that, in turn, generated a need for reliquaries not only in Milan, but also elsewhere. Thus, Ambrose distributed relics on an unprecedented scale to other bishops in the West including Paulinus of Nola, Gaudentius of Brescia and Victricius of Rouen. We recall that Victricius’ sermon, quoted above, was delivered in 396 on the occasion of the arrival of relics from Ambrose to the city of Rouen. From it, we gather that the arrival was a deliberately orchestrated celebration along the lines of the Roman emperor’s adventus into a city, joyously welcomed by “all ages” and social hierarchies of the city.25 A unique sixth-century eastern ivory plaque from Trier (Figure 10.3) that probably stems from a reliquary casket represents such an adventus of relics: two bishops seated in a carriage and holding the relics in a casket with a pitched lid arrive through the gate of a city, possibly Constantinople, in a procession led by the emperor and received by the empress standing in the doorway of the about-to-be-finished church (workmen are still busy on the roof) where the relics will be deposited. The ceremony unfolds before an architectural backdrop with personages of various ranks, some holding censers and singing in acclaim.26

Figure 10.3  Ivory plaque, 6th century, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.
Paulinus of Nola’s *arcula* and other reliquaries

Paulinus of Nola also wrote about the relics that he had received from Ambrose and installed in the church in Fundi, just south of Naples:

Under the lighted altar, a royal slab of purple marble covers the bones of holy men. Here God’s grace sets before you the power of the apostles by the great pledges contained in this meagre dust. Here lie father Andrew, the gloriously famed Luke, and Nazarius, a martyr glorious for the blood he shed; here are Protasius and his peer Gervasius, whom God made known after long ages to His servant Ambrose. One simple casket (*arcula*) embraces here his holy band, and in its tiny bosom embraces names so great.27

We recognize from this that we have already encountered the martyrs inside Paulinus’ altar; they overlap to a significant extent with those we have already encountered in Milan: St Andrew and Saints Gervasius and Protasius. Hence, to establish a special relationship with his recipients Ambrose wanted them to have relics of the same saints that he kept in Milan. To that end he had no qualms about dismembering his own saints because, as we still recall from his friend Victricius: the whole is in the part, and no matter how small, the saint is still present.

Paulinus’ text provides early written evidence about the use of caskets as containers of relics and about their placement under the altar of the church. However, as far as the more precise appearance of his “simple casket” is concerned, the Latin term for it, *arcula*, still leaves us with a lot of leeway. Paulinus’ reliquary could, for example, have been shaped according to a very popular design for the period’s reliquaries: a small sarcophagus with either a flat, curved, or pitched lid and rendered in either stone or silver. As such, the design would serve as a sort of replacement tomb for the saint at the same time as evoking the relics inside as representing the martyrs with their full bodies. A sixth-century example of such a reliquary is at the Metropolitan Museum of New York. The pocket-size rectangular coffin is topped by a pitched lid with a hole for oil in the top center (Figure 10.4). It is decorated with Greek crosses on either side and originates, like most such reliquaries, in Southeastern Europe or Asia Minor.28

The casket could also have followed a decisively more luxurious, albeit quite exceptional, type: the ivory box with carved images. A deluxe example from late fourth or early fifth-century Rome or Milan is the famous Brescia casket decorated on all sides with scenes from both the Old and New Testament and with a number of bust portraits of the apostles. Because of its relatively large size (Figure 10.5) and profusion of elaborate imagery, some have challenged the casket’s original function as a reliquary, that is, made to be hidden from view inside an altar. If not, maybe it served as a container for the transfer of relics during such translation ceremonies as shown on the Trier ivory, where the two bishops on the cart are holding a casket. Yet, the fact that its shape, material, and figural representations made it suitable as a container for precious relics provides good reason to assume that the Brescia casket was already in the early Middle Ages used as a relic-container.29

Given that ivory was even more exceptional than gold as a material for reliquaries, it is more likely that Paulinus’ casket was made of silver just like that of his fellow bishop Ambrose and a few others that have been found in churches in both the East and West. It could have been box-like, like Ambrose’s, or oval-shaped like the well-known silver casket from Grado (Figure 10.6) from ca. 500 that was found in a stone coffin under the main altar in the northern Italian city’s cathedral. Contrary to the Brescia and San Nazaro caskets, this one is not adorned with biblical narratives, but with engraved and embossed iconic imagery. The lid shows a large
Figure 10.4  Marble reliquary in the shape of a sarcophagus, 6th century. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org. Accession no. 49.69.2a, b. Rogers Fund, 1949.

Figure 10.5  Ivory casket, late 4th/early 5th century, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, San Salvatore. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.
crux gemmata (jeweled cross) atop the four rivers of paradise and flanked by two lambs. Its body has eight bust medallions of Christ, the apostle princes, and five other saints, including one woman. Unusual for reliquaries of this period, we know the names of each one of the portrayed saints (apart from Peter and Paul) through an inscription that runs around the body (the local saints of Cantius, Cantianus, Cantianilla, Quirinus and Latinus). There can be little doubt that the casket contained relics of the saints that it portrays. By identifying the relics—and contrary to the biblical representations of the above-mentioned caskets—the iconic imagery is directly related to the contents of the reliquary.

Another inscription reveals the names of its three secular patrons and the motivation behind their commissioning of the casket: “The dignified Lawrence, the esteemed John and Nicephorus have fulfilled their vow to the saints.” The oval reliquary from Grado, in other words, was a gift offered to the saints inside the reliquary—an ex voto—upon their fulfillment of a wish that had been made to them by the patrons of the casket. The function of a reliquary as an ex voto to the saints, which is not unique to the Grado example, testifies to their intercessory power, and the role of artifacts in facilitating this sort of exchange between the faithful and the divine. In this way the reliquary aligns with liturgical objects such as patens, chalices, and censers that often carried similar kinds of inscriptions.

If made of silver, Paulinus’ casket could have been decorated with engraved or embossed representations of symbolic, narrative, or iconic character, or all of those combined. A preference for biblical scenes would have generated contents less specific to the relics of the saints inside but serving more overarching theological meanings. An iconic portrait imagery, by contrast, would have personalized the saints whose disembodied and unidentifiable body parts were contained inside. Even if made of silver, however, the reliquary from Fundi could have been left blank or just decorated with a cross as in the case of the stone sarcophagus from the Metropolitan Museum.

Figure 10.6  Silver casket, c. 500, Cathedral of St Eufemia, Grado. Photo: Galit Noga-Banai.
The history of the cult of relics and reliquaries during the first centuries of the Latin Church can, as we have now seen, be written through a small number of bishop impresarios, among whom Ambrose of Milan was the protagonist and ahead of his time. His fragmentation, translation, and incorporation of the bodies of the martyrs became a model for other bishops and gathered followers from Nola to Rouen and beyond. Indeed, the letters and poems mentioned above demonstrate a tight and authoritative network of episcopal friendships through which relics of saints traveled rapidly across large distances. Among the motivations that led Ambrose and his peers to change the relic policy of the West was, as we have seen, the ambition to strengthen the identity of the community and the role of the bishop within it. What prompted this development and the interest in relics to begin with was, more broadly speaking, a basic human need to make the divine—invisible and abstract—tangible in some form. Through their relics, the saints opened a channel of communication with God, a corridor between earth and heaven that made God present among the everyday lives of people. What made it possible for these late third- and early fourth-century bishops to implement their new approach, eventually changing the spiritual topography of the late antique world, was less an increasing demand from the new Christian masses than the growing material wealth of the Church. Only so could magnificent shrines, lavish processions, and reliquaries of ivory, silver and gold see the light of day.31

The poetics of relics

The material splendor that came to be associated with relics overlapped and interacted with a literary genre, the ekphrasis, that in Late Antique literature developed around the martyrs. By linking the bare bits of bones with an aesthetic dazzle through associations to art and evocative metaphors, ekphrasis appealed to the sensuous imaginations of both readers and listeners and, in turn, made the relics come alive as spiritual living objects in their own right. The Christian Latin poet Prudentius, in particular, excelled in making art, poetry and relics fuse into one whole. In his *Peristephanon*, a collection of hagiographic poems, Prudentius wrote about the church placed over the body of St Paul in Rome:

the Ostian Road keeps the memorial church of Paul, where the river grazes the land on its left bank. The splendour of the place is princely, for our good emperor dedicated this seat and decorated its whole extent with great wealth. He laid plates on the beams so as to make all the light within golden like the sun’s radiance at its rising, and supported the gold-panelled ceiling on pillars of Parian marble set out there in four rows. Then he covered the curves of the arches with splendid glass of different hues, like meadows that are bright with flowers in the spring.32

Such poetry exemplifies the late antique attitude about relics. As a forceful appeal to the reader’s or listener’s imaginative senses, this kind of hyper-real imagery contributed in no small part to the empowerment of relics and, of course, to the art that both contained and surrounded them. In particular, the frequent literary associations of the saints’ resting places with light and brilliance, as generated by precious metals, sparkling colors and even jewels, do much to explain the increasingly frequent choice of silver and gold for reliquaries, and glittering apse mosaics as the backdrop of the altar where they were deposited. Through their material glitter the reliquary, as well as its church, would become both a receptacle and generator of light—the spiritual light of the living saints.33
The *loca sancta* of the Holy Land

Although the bodies of saints were initially the only source of relics, the rise of pilgrimage to places associated with the life of Christ provided additional holy matter to mediate between humans and God. This matter was not a body part but any kind of material—wood, pieces of cloth, oil, stone, or dirt—that one could claim to have been in direct contact with Christ’s body or a relic, or to have derived from places (*loca sancta*) in the Holy Land associated with his life on earth as recorded by the Gospels. A sixth-century wooden box (Figure 10.7) from Syria or Palestine provides an example of the connection between relic and place. A sliding lid opens up to an interior of stones and small pieces of wood embedded in a layer of plaster in the shape of the cross. Labels on several of the stones indicate their place of origin: the Mount of Olives, Bethlehem, Sion, and the Anastasis. The lid’s interior is painted with five scenes from the life of Christ: *The Nativity*, *Baptism of Christ*, *Crucifixion*, *the Women at the Tomb* and *the Ascension*. The stones and pieces of wood derive from places that are key to Christian salvation and are therefore imbued with the holy power of these particular sites. Just as the tiny piece of bone would represent the martyr saint in his entire body, so does each of these objects embody a *locus sanctus*. As on the reliquary of San Nazaro, image and relic stand in a meaningful relationship. On the one hand, the painted scenes link the *loca sancta* objects in the casket with the life and passion of Christ. The objects, on the other hand, serve as historical and topographical proof of the historical events and their sites. The casket is not just a pilgrim’s souvenir box, but a Holy Land *en miniature* that continues to ensure its owner access to the sacred power of its historical places, on the journey and at home.34

(a)
Reliquaries and the cult of relics

Constantine the Great, in the wake of 313, made Palestine, and Jerusalem in particular, a special destination for pilgrims that lasted until the Arab conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean in the seventh century. By sending his mother, Helena, to the Holy Land to dedicate his newly sponsored churches that marked the sites of Christ’s birth (Bethlehem), death (Golgotha), and Ascension (Mount of Olives), Constantine initiated a process that transformed the places of Christ’s life from being merely historical to being _loki suanitu_. The Emperor’s decision enabled pilgrims to see and touch the sites sanctified by Christ’s former living presence. Again, we can turn to Paulinus of Nola for a description of this experience:

No other sentiment draws men to Jerusalem but the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was physically present . . . So if the desire is a truly religious one to see the places in which Christ walked, suffered, rose again, and ascended into heaven, and if there is a blessing in taking and keeping a pinch of dust from these places or a mere mote from the wood of the Cross, just think how much greater and fuller is the grace of beholding an old man yet alive who is walking proof of divine Truth.35

During the following decades a sacred topography emerged around sites within and outside Jerusalem that was marked by events or commemorations of people from both the Old and New Testaments and, in turn, produced new types of relics and reliquaries. Prime among them, and different from the relics of place discussed above, was the relic of the True Cross. According to traditions dating back to the late fourth century, the cross on which Christ was crucified
was discovered by Helena in c. 326 and installed in Constantine’s basilica on Golgotha where pilgrims venerated it. The anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza in Italy, who visited Jerusalem around 570, wrote in his diary:

In the courtyard of the basilica [at Golgotha] is a small room where they keep the wood of the Cross. We venerated it with a kiss . . . At the moment when the Cross is brought out of this small room for veneration . . . a star appears in the sky, and comes over the place where they lay the Cross. It stays overhead whilst they are venerating the Cross, and they offer oil to be blessed in little flasks. When the mouth of one of the little flasks touches the Wood of the Cross, the oil instantly bubbles over, and unless it is closed very quickly it all spills out.36

The little flasks containing such sanctified oil by direct contact with the Cross are the so-called **ampullae**. They were likely worn around the neck of pious pilgrims to ensure good health and protection during the journey and at home. Such **ampullae** could be made of lead or terracotta, even silver, and were widely used at different holy sites, including the burial places of martyrs, and contained substances such as oil or wax from the sites that were called **eulogiae** (blessings). Inscriptions on the **ampullae**, such as a sixth- or seventh-century example from the Cleveland Museum of Art, identifies the substance as “oil of the wood of life,” and is decorated with images of the **Crucifixion** and **Ascension** (Figure 10.8). Similar to the wooden box from the Vatican Museums, such representations documented the sacred origin of the oil, whereas the miraculous oil would authorize the sanctity of the depicted sites.37

(a)
The True Cross

Real bits and pieces from the wooden instrument of Christ’s Resurrection, and not just substances that had touched it, were put in circulation from very early on. Even before the legend of the True Cross was recorded towards the end of the fourth century, Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, had commented that “already the whole world is filled with fragments of the wood of the Cross.” As with the bodies of the saints, such fragmentation did not diminish the power of the relics. Paulinus of Nola, who had acquired a piece of the wood from Jerusalem and decided to send it to his friend Severus for the consecration of his basilica, explained:

Indeed this cross of inanimate wood has living power, and ever since its discovery it has lent its wood to the countless, almost daily, prayers of men. Yet it suffers no diminution; though daily divided, it seems to remain whole to those who lift it, and always entire to those who venerate it. Assuredly it draws this power of incorruptibility, this undiminishing integrity, from the Blood of that Flesh which endured death yet did not see corruption.

Before sending his sliver of the holy wood away, Paulinus enclosed it in a “golden casing.” He did so, he explained, as an imitation of Severus’ faith that had been “tried in the fire” and equivalent to the “kingdom of God.” He moreover recommended that Severus either use it for his daily protection and healing, or bury it within the altar, although there it might not “be
always accessible according to the need.” In that case, Paulinus assured his friend, it would be
sufficient if Severus’ basilica were entrusted to the apostles and martyrs.⁴¹

Among the relics of the Holy Land, the True Cross was in a league of its own. Although
a contact relic associated with a particular place (Golgotha), pieces of the Cross were first of
all considered a relic of Christ himself who had left no corporeal remains. They were also dif-
ferent from relics of martyrs that, as we have seen, were associated with a particular city and
community for which they served as patrons and protectors. Beginning with fourth-century
bishop and Church historian Eusebius, the sign of the Cross, which appeared to Constantine
in a vision and secured his victory over co-emperor Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian
Bridge in 312, became the triumphant standard for the new Christian Empire. Significantly,
it was Constantine’s mother, as mentioned above, who shortly thereafter discovered the True
Cross and made an imperial claim to it. And during the centuries that followed, it was less from
Jerusalem than from Constantinople, to where large parts of the Cross had been transferred, that
relics of the True Cross were distributed.⁴²

In Rome, first the emperor, and then the popes, were equally keen on linking their rule
with the standard-bearer of Christian truth and power. The sources reveal the early presence
of relics of the True Cross in Rome; Constantine erected a basilica in the Sessorian Palace
(Santa Croce in Gerusalemme) where he installed a golden, jewel-encrusted reliquary for the

Figure 10.9 Reliquary cross of Justin II (r 565–578) (Crux Vaticana). Byzantine (Constantinople), 6th
century, with later additions, Treasury of S. Peter’s. Photo:. Scala/Art Resource, New York.
Reliquaries and the cult of relics

True Cross. Pope Leo I (440–461) acknowledged receipt of a fragment of the True Cross from Jerusalem, which he highlighted as important material proof of the Incarnation. Pope Hilarus (461–468) deposited a relic of the True Cross in an oratory of the Holy Cross he commissioned adjacent to the Lateran baptistery. Likewise, Pope Symmachus (498–514) built an oratory at St Peter’s for a fragment of the True Cross installed in a gold cross with jewels.33 Finally, among the earliest surviving reliquaries of the True Cross is the Cross of Justin II (565–574) in the Treasury of St Peter’s (Figure 10.9), which served as a diplomatic gift between two Christian powers: Rome and Constantinople. At the juncture of its arms, the silver gilt cross, which was restored in 2001, contains a capsule for the cross-shaped piece of the True Cross. An inscription surrounded by precious stones informs us that Emperor Justin, portrayed with his wife in medallions on the ends of the cross arms, gave this cross “to Rome.”34 Although we do not know of the particular circumstances of the gift, there can be little doubt that the sixth-century reliquary rendered as a victorious standard served as a powerful display of Byzantine imperial power vis-à-vis a papal Rome weakened by foreign invasion in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476.

Notes


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16 Ibid.
24 John M. McCulloh, “From Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change in Papal Relic Policy From the 6th to the 8th Century,” in *Pietas. Festschrift für Bernhard Köttin*, eds E. Dassmann and K. Frank (Münster, Aschendorff, 1980), 313–324.
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41 Paulinus of Nola, Letter 32, 8, trans. Walsh, 142.

42 Frolow, Relique, 55–107; Holger A. Klein, Byzanz, der Westen und das “wahre” Kreuz (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 19–47.

43 Leo the Great, Epistula, 139, PL 14, 1106; Book of Pontiffs, 20–21; 39; 45; Frolow, Relique, 173–177 (nos 20, 23, 27); Sible de Blauw, “Jerusalem in Rome and the Cult of the Cross,” in Pratum romanum, Richard Krautheimer zum 100. Geburtstag, ed. R. Colella et al. (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1997), 55–73.


Further reading


