

Reliquaries in the form of church buildings in european culture

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Abstract The report is dedicated to the consideration of several reliquaries of the Catholic Church, which are made in the form of different buildings. With their external decoration and features of appearance, these reliquaries can provide enough interesting material for research in various fields. Reliquaries were most often given the form of an oblong building, decorated with ivory and enamel, often with niches in the side walls, which contained the figures of the apostles or saints, with statues of Christ and the Mother of God on the pediments. Since the 11th century, the form and size of the reliquaries of the Roman Catholic Church have changed significantly, becoming more diverse. Medium sizes begin to predominate (up to 50 centimeters). Reliquaries continue to retain the form of an oblong building or pyramid. The precious storages for the relics of the Christian saint or the objects he touched are the most refined and perfect works of medieval art. Several precious reliquaries and portable altars of jewelers from the Middle Ages give evidence of the high level of plastic development in these times. In the "mature" Romanesque era, reliquaries began to be made in the form of a church, which, in addition to the longitudinal main nave, had two side naves and a transverse one, with protruding pilasters, patterned through combed gratings, and a high roof and turrets. The most luxurious reliquaries of that era are found in Rhine places: the reliquaries of the Aachen Chapel, the reliquaries of the Cologne Residence, the shrines of the Hildesheim Cathedral, and others. One of the world-famous Catholic relics is the reliquary (tomb) with the remains of the three biblical Wise men, called the "sarcophagus of the three Wise men".

Keywords: relics, reliquaries, nave, Aachen Chapel, reliquaries in the form of a church

1. Introduction

The consideration of Catholic reliquaries in different architectural forms is the subject of this paper. With their external decoration and features of appearance, these reliquaries can provide enough interesting material for research in various fields (Ghambaryan, 2008). Reliquaries were typically oblong buildings decorated with ivory and enamel, with niches on the side walls containing figurines of apostles or saints, and pediments with sculptures of Christ and the Mother of God (Kirakosyan, 2023; Manukyan, 2021). In the "mature" Romanesque era, reliquaries began to be made in the shape of churches, with a longitudinal main nave, two side naves, and a transverse one, all with jutting pilasters patterned via combing gratings, a high ceiling, and turrets. The most opulent reliquaries of that era are found in Rhine places: reliquaries of the Aachen Chapel, reliquaries of the Cologne Residence, shrines of the Hildesheim Cathedral, and others (Ghambaryan, 2008).

One of the world-famous Catholic relics is the reliquary (tomb) with the remains of the three biblical Wise men, called the "sarcophagus of the three Wise men". Since the early Christian years (since ancient Rome), the veneration of relics of saints has been considered a key part of the Christian faith. The first official decision on the veneration of relics (Church Council of Carthage: 393-419) and the tradition of honoring them had a great influence on the formation of Christian cult rituals, as well as the creation of the roads and places of pilgrimage (Ghambaryan, 2008).

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From a theological point of view (according to the letters of the Apostle Paul), the human body is a "container of divine energy" with an "eternal destination", as Christ, during the second coming, will "transform" it so that it resembles his own body. The glory of the holy relics is therefore a foreshadowing of this new, glorified state of the body, and a testimony of faith in that "destination".

From a "political" point of view, the material relics of the saints are a testimony of the historical existence of the saints (a "proof" of the existence and divine power of Christ), which not only validates the theological arguments, but also creates a physical effect. As we can read on the site of the Princeton University Art Museum (2024) "Pilgrims from every stratum of society were driven by the same conviction: that the sanctity of holy people, objects, and places was in some measure transferable through physical contact".

According to the above assembly, sanctuaries could only be built at the site of martyrdom or over the remains of relics. In the Middle Ages, the veneration of relics became mandatory, and each church was obliged to have at least one reliquary (shrine) containing a body part of a saint or a fragment of the True Cross. Rags were also used by believers to touch the saint's grave. Such widespread interest in the relics was due to the position of the Roman Catholic Church, which was engaged in verifying and confirming the authenticity of the relics, and a unique standard of genuine relics was designed. Reliquaries were often provided with self-description special documents (Certificate of Relics) (Cruz, 2015).

In the period following the persecution of Christians, the veneration of the relics of saints spread very quickly both in the West and in the East. In the Roman Church, it started in the 4th century. Initially, there was no custom of enclosing the saint's relics in portable boxes. Later, a number of churches considered it important to place them in reliquaries, boxes that were initially in imitation of a part of the human body, so that the faithful could easily perceive the "nature" of the holy relic.

The preservation of saints' relics in Armenian churches most likely also began in the 4th century, something that tradition and historical sources associate with St. Gregory the Illuminator, who converted Armenia to Christianity early in the 4th century [Thomson (1976) and Thomson (1978), cited by Kouymjian D. (2005)]. In Middle Age, a very popular form of reliquary was that of the "Holy Right Hand".

2. Literature review

2.1. Comparing the reliquaries of the Armenian and Catholic Churches

While studying the Armenian Holy Right-hand reliquaries, we found out how widespread this type of reliquary is in the Armenian Church (with the best-known example being the right hand of Saint Gregory himself, a reliquary dating earlier than the twelfth century and currently located in Antelias, Lebanon, while another right hand of the Saint, kept at Holy Etchmiadzin, is encased in a gilded arm-shaped reliquary fashioned in 1657).

Comparing the reliquaries of the Armenian Church with those of the Catholic Church, we find that reliquaries in the form of the Holy Right Hand (or more generally in the form of a human limb) also exist in the Catholic Church, but they are strikingly fewer than reliquaries in the form of a church (or more generally in the form of a building, shrine, or altar).

The reliquaries of the Armenian Apostolic Church do not have the appearance of a church (Kirakosyan, 2022). Despite their differences, the reliquaries in Armenian silversmithing or church art can be grouped into the following basic types (Figures 1a, b, and c):

- Rectangular reliquaries with folding doors,
- Cross repositories of relics, in the center of which, sometimes also on the wings, holy relics were placed,
- Right-hand reliquaries (in the form of a wrist, etc.).

The last type is the most characteristic of the Armenian cult tradition and art, although, as mentioned above, right-hand shape boxes are also found in European culture. The right-hand-shaped reliquaries were usually presented with a gesture of blessing, with the ring finger and thumb joined together, symbolizing the Holy Trinity and the eternal universe. They were usually made from very thin gold and silver plates, using the technique of ornamentation. They were encrusted with precious stones and decorated with sculptural images. Having a reliquary in the shape of a right hand was one of the Armenian devotional traditions common in old Armenian churches and monasteries. The relics of each saint, be they a whole bone or just a fragment, were placed in a right-hand shaped silver case. Today, in the Armenian Apostolic Church, both in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin and in Antelias—in the Museum of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia—a number of right-hand reliquaries of saints are preserved. Although they are not essentially different from the corresponding reliquaries of the Catholic church, it would be a mistake to attribute this to the influence of the West, since Armenian masters in different periods themselves often had a certain influence on European church art (Ghambaryan, 2008) (Figure 2).

In order to emphasize the differences between the two church traditions, this work presents a separate group of reliquaries typical of the Catholic Church, those that have the form of a building. Among them, the following reliquaries, created at different historical times and of great interest, have been singled out:

1. Reliquary of Saint Anastasios, Aachen,
2. Reliquary of Mary Magdalene kept at the Munich residence,
3. Reliquary of the Three Wise Men, Cologne,
4. Reliquary of Charlemagne, Aachen,
5. Reliquary of the St. Virgin Mary, Aachen.

As mentioned above, in the Middle Ages, the veneration of relics became mandatory, and each church was obliged to have at least one reliquary containing a body part of a saint or a fragment of the True Cross. The shapes and sizes of the

Catholic Church’s reliquaries are quite diverse, as we can see, for example, between the reliquary of Widukind, Berlin (785), and the mobile shrine of Apostle Andrew in the city of Trier (977-993) (Figure 3).



a. The Holy Geghard (Lance).
 Source: <https://dzen.ru>



b. Cross With Relic of ST. John the Baptist.
 Source: <https://gisher.org/gallery>



c. The Right Hand of (St. James of Nisibis) St Hagob of Nisibis.
 Source: <https://gisher.org/gallery>

Figure 1 Different types of Armenian reliquaries.

2.2. Reliquaries made in the form of buildings

From the 9th century to the 11th century, the Byzantine style often prevailed in the decorative-applied art samples typical of the Roman Catholic Church. Reliquaries were usually made in the form of an oblong building, decorated with ivory and enamel. The figures of apostles or saints were often placed in the niches of the side sections, and the statues of Christ and Mother of God were placed in the front section. In the 10th century, one can see a desire to change the simple form of the containers for holy relics and to combine them with church attributes.

In the "mature" Romanesque era (11th-12th centuries), reliquaries began to be made in the form of a church, which had lateral and transverse quadrangular pillars and decorated gates. Along with church-shaped reliquaries, cylindrical reliquaries were also made, resting on figured legs or pillars with a pointed roof or dome. Since 1246, after Pope Urban IV instituted the "Feast of Corpus Christi", the Roman Catholic Church has begun to use the so-called monstrance (lat. monstrare), a kind of reliquary, for the public display of relics on feast days.

An example of earlier reliquaries in the form of architectural buildings is the reliquary of St. Anastasios the Persian, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of New York and contains the skull’s relic of St. Anastasios (Figure 4).

The reliquary was made in Antioch (969-1025). It is made of silver and gilded with niello. The reliquary has the appearance of a single-domed church with an apse. On the frame of the reliquary, there is an inscription in Greek letters indicating the names of the customer and the craftsman. In the case of this reliquary, one can talk about the absolute predominance of ornamental motifs, strict forms, "subtle noble black" on silver and gilding techniques. The ornament creates a feeling of grandeur, calm and static.



Since the 11th century, the shape and dimensions of the Roman Catholic Church’s reliquaries have changed significantly: they become more diverse. The reliquaries continue to be made in the form of an elongated building or a pyramid. Medium sizes (up to 50 cm) begin to predominate. A similar example is the reliquary kept in the Chapel of the Munich Residence (11th century) (Figure 5) (Brunner et al., 1966).



The Reliquary of the Cross of Floreffe, Louvre, Paris.

Sources: [https://upload.wikimedia](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Reliquaire_de_la_Croix_de_Floreffe.jpg)
[https://upload.wikimedia](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Reliquaire_de_la_Croix_de_Floreffe.jpg)



The Ark of St. Taurine in Saint-Taurin church, Évreux, France, 13th century.

Source: [https://www.guidigo](https://www.guidigo.com/fr/le-arc-de-saint-taurin)



Right Hand Reliquary of Charlemagne (Charls the Great).

Source: <https://dzen.ru>



Right Hand Reliquary of St Gregory Illuminator.

Source: [https://www.qahana](https://www.qahana.com)

Figure 2 European and Armenian Reliquares.

2.3. The reliquary of the St. Virgin Mary

This reliquary, made of oak, is covered in gilded embossed silver. In structure, it is very similar to the reliquary of Charles the Great. The master who created these works of art remains unknown, but experts admit that the reliquaries were made by only one "master’s hand" (Hahn, 1997) (Figure 8).

The Blessed Virgin Mary’s reliquary is made in the form of a single-nave church. In the center of its main side is the Virgin Mary with a newborn Jesus in her arms. Charles the Great is depicted on the opposite side, with Jesus Christ on the left

The reliquary in the shape of an oblong building with dimensions of 29.5·17.5·12.5cm consists of 3 parts. In the central part, in a crystal case, the relic of Mary Magdalene is kept, and in the side parts - the relics of Holy Great Martyr Barbara and the German Catholic empress Saint Cunegonde. The reliquary is made of black ebony wood, and the separate parts are made of walnut, pear, and oak wood. It is decorated with rock crystals, pearls, rubies, enamel, and gold (Brunner et al., 1966).

One of the world-famous Catholic reliquaries contains the relics of the biblical Three Wise Men (Figure 6). In 1164, Emperor Frederick I of the Hohenstaufen dynasty gave Rainald von Dassel, Archbishop of Cologne a reliquary containing the relics of the Three Wise Men: Melchior, Gaspar and Baltazar, said to have been found by Saint Helena. The reliquary was made in 1120 by Nicholas of Verdun, a famous jeweler of those times, and is presented in the form of an early Christian temple, a three-nave basilica (house of Basileus or King), with dimensions of 1.53·1.10·2.20m. The wooden case of the box is covered with gilded copper and silver plates. The figures were made using the method of sculptural stamping (embossing). Only the front part of the reliquary is entirely made of gold leaves. The three-nave basilica is decorated with around 1,000 precious stones and pearls. In the center of its front part, St. Virgin Mary and baby Jesus are depicted. From the left, the Three Wise Men bow to them. The image of the German Emperor Otto IV was also added, as he had raised large funds for the temple and the preparation of the reliquary. On the same side, there is finally a representation of the Baptism of Jesus, according to the evangelical tradition.

The city of Aachen, an important place of pilgrimage in medieval times, is famous for its holy reliquaries. When Frederick I Barbarossa proceeded to canonize Charles the Great in 1165, his remains were placed in the shrine. In 1215, a new reliquary was made, which is still kept in the Imperial Catholic Chapel of Aachen. It has a fairly simple design in the form of a single-nave church. The front part of the reliquary depicts Charles the Great on his throne. The medallion at the top depicts Jesus, blessing Charles the Great. The figures of Pope Leo III and Archbishop Turpin are on the edges. On the sides of the reliquary are depicted 16 emperors, from Louis the Pious to Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. The cover of the reliquary depicts the life of Charles the Great as a follower of the teachings of Jesus Christ (Figure 7).



and Leo III on the right. On the cover of the reliquary, the Christian holidays are depicted. The bodies depicted on the shrines are in static positions.

The reliquary was created in 1239 for the 4 greatest sanctities of Aachen: the gown of the Virgin Mary, the newborn Christ's swaddling clothes, the blood-stained loincloth of Jesus Christ, and the scarf that was wrapped around the severed head of John the Baptist.



Carolingian Revival, Widukind reliquary, Berlin, 785.
 Source: <https://www.cushnieent>



The reliquary of Andrew the First-Called, 977- 993.
 Source: <https://dzen.ru>

Figure 3 Reliquaries of the Catholic Church.



Figure 4 The reliquary of St. Anastasios (969-1025).
 Source: <https://i.pining.com>



Figure 5 The reliquary kept in the Chapel of the Munich Residence.
 Source: Brunner, Hojer, Seelig und Heym (1966).



Figure 6 The reliquary with the relics of the Three Wise Men.

Source: <https://img-fotki>



Figure 7 The reliquary of Charles the Great.

Source: <https://www.roma-antiqua>



Figure 8 The reliquary of the St. Virgin Mary.

Source: <https://ic.pics.livejournal>

3. Discussion

The study of this material raises a number of important questions, including:

Comparing the reliquaries of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church, one can note that the Right-hand reliquaries in both churches are basically similar, however, it would be a mistake to completely attribute this phenomenon to the influence of the West, since at different periods Armenian masters often had a certain influence on European church art.

We can say that the different emphasis given in the context of the Armenian and the Catholic Church (on the one hand on a container in the form of a human limb, and on the other hand on a container in the form of a temple) perhaps has a theological basis (emphasis respectively on the divine nature of the body and on the institutional status of the church).

Were some examples of reliquaries made in the form of Catholic Church buildings merely imitating those structures, or were they their exact miniature copies?

It can be noted that the masters tried to preserve and present the general appearance of the reliquaries but the latter are not exact copies of the churches.

4. Final considerations

Thus, this research delves into the intriguing world of reliquaries, with a particular focus on the ones in the form of church buildings within European culture. The exploration spans various historical periods, from the early Christian years to the mature Romanesque era, offering insights into the evolution of these sacred containers for relics. The study highlights the transition from simple forms, such as oblong structures, to more complex ones resembling churches, with detailed descriptions of the most notable examples. As a result of the comparison between the reliquaries of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church, it turns out that right-hand reliquaries are widespread in both traditions.



Overall, a comprehensive study of the artistic, theological, and historical aspects of reliquaries has been carried out, shedding light on the intricate connection between religious practices, artistic expression, and the evolving cultural contexts within which these sacred objects were created. The questions raised in the discussion invite further exploration and reflection, contributing to the broader discourse on the intersection of art, religion, and history.

Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable.

Conflict of Interest

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