

Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500–1500

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9 Rocks of Jerusalem

Bringing the Holy Land home

Elina Gertsman and Asa Simon Mittman

Introduction: “Feelings for sacred *things*”

In his seminal work, *The World of Late Antiquity*, published in 1971, Peter Brown characterizes the difference between late Roman polytheism and the earliest Christianity as a difference between *things* and *people*. He writes:

Traditional paganism had expressed itself through forms as impersonal as the universe itself: it mobilized feelings for sacred *things* – for ancient rites, for statues, for oracles, for vast beloved temples. The “new mood,” by contrast, threw up men – raw individuals who believed that they were the agents of vast forces.¹

Toward the end of his study, Brown makes a finer distinction. The devotion to holy *men* only lingered as long as those men lived, as long as the initial age of martyrs and other early Christian heroes endured. Eventually, as was inevitable, these people were outlasted by things they left behind, by pieces of their bodies, objects they touched, and places they lived:

They had lasted while mere men came and passed away. The new devotion was an upsurge of loyalty to holy *things*, while the enthusiasm of previous centuries had concentrated on holy *men*. In Rome and in Gaul, the relic and the martyr’s grave totally ousted the living holy man in the popular imagination.²

Brown generalizes, of course, but his observations on the role of objects in changing patterns of devotion encapsulate the main themes we explore here. Our focus is a remarkable object – or, rather, a collection of objects, in turn housed within another object, which bears on it representations of yet other things: a reliquary box, once held in the treasury of the Sancta Sanctorum in the Lateran Palace, containing bits of stone, wood, and cloth, labeled with locations from the “Holy Land” (Plate 1).³ The box, now in the Museo Sacro in the Vatican, has been credited to sixth-century Syria or Palestine.⁴ Its sliding lid (obverse) bears a painting of the cross intersected by what appear to be a lance and a reed with a sponge, forming a schematic Christogram, inscribed within a mandorla and placed on the Golgotha hill; Christ’s initials are inscribed in the upper corners, and *alpha* and *omega* are painted on either side of the hillock (Plate 4). On the reverse side, which faces the relics enshrined in the box, is a series of images narrating scenes from the life of Christ: the Nativity, baptism, crucifixion, Holy Women at the Tomb, and ascension. These five scenes portray an encapsulation

of Christ's earthly experience with great economy. Altogether, the contents of the box, the monogram, and the paintings function as a threefold conjuring of Christ: in image, name, and material remains made sacred by contact with Christ.⁵

Building on Brown's observations, we consider this box and its contents through the lenses of thing theory and theories of memory. We pay particular attention to the tensions between the individual objects and the ways their arrangement and proximity create a collective; their invocation of distant locales; and their agentic potential. The objects housed in this box look to most modern viewers like no more than what they literally are – rocks, splinters of wood, scraps of textile. Yet for their collector, and for subsequent medieval viewers – including the popes who had exclusive access once the box was in the *Sancta Sanctorum* – these *things* would have served as a complex mnemonic map, punctuated with a series of visual, material, and cognitive triggers that potentially encouraged an ersatz, performative pilgrimage.⁶ We inquire into the possible patterns and processes of an imaginative, transcendent journey, made possible by these base fragments.

Pilgrimages far and near

Christian pilgrimage, which originated in late antiquity, was popular until 638, when the Holy Land was incorporated into the vast Umayyad Empire.⁷ The sacred sites in and around Jerusalem were of great importance to early pilgrims, who collected various natural and man-made objects considered to have therapeutic and transcendent properties, which allowed the travelers to retain a material connection to these locales once they returned home. Indeed, Jaś Elsner argues that “[t]hese places, themselves [are] a collection to be experienced by pilgrims.”⁸ However, the Holy Land's centrality to pilgrimage dwindled even before the fall of Jerusalem. As Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés note:

By the end of the fourth century, the entire landscape of the Roman empire would be dotted with martyria, shrines and churches marking the specific spots where important saints had lived, the places where their bodies finally came to rest, and the location of significant artefacts associated with them, such as the True Cross.⁹

From this point on, travel to the Holy Land was decreasing in irreplaceability as the distributed network of sacred sites expanded throughout the Mediterranean and European world.¹⁰ As Brown writes, Gregory of Tours found that “relics were everywhere, scattered throughout the entire Christian world. In every region, there were specks of dust unlike all other specks of dust, fragments of bone unlike other fragments, tombs unlike other tombs.”¹¹ Our present subject was, then, not only a node within this network, nor only a model of the sacred geography from which it came, but also a microcosm of both the Holy Land it explicitly references and the Western European world, whose many relics – which reconfigured the landscape into the body of Christ – were being indexed by the assemblage of fragments, pebbles, and splinters arranged within the box.

Spiritual pilgrimages challenged the necessity of physical journeys to the Holy Land through the proliferation of relics.¹² To discourage pilgrimage, in the fifth century

Abbot Shenoute of Atripe related his vision of Christ, who inspired Shenoute to “glorify Jerusalem in your monastery, which you have dedicated to my name together with those who will hear and obey you, as equals of the angels. . . . You must know that my Cross is everywhere for whoever desires to repent.”¹³ That is, although there was certainly value in the sites of the Nativity and the Passion, the importance of visiting them was on the decline by the time the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary was assembled. This was not because they were unimportant. Quite the contrary: it was because they were seen as transportable and because “my Cross” – embodied in each of its splinters – was already everywhere. Indeed, even for those visiting Jerusalem in the flesh, the spiritual pilgrimage might eventually displace the physical journey. For example, Peter the Iberian, a highly influential fifth-century Palestinian bishop, was “an enthusiastic pilgrim,” who on one visit to Jerusalem fell down in full *proskynesis*, crawled the final stretch of the route, and then “repeatedly touched the holy ground with [his] lips and eyes.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, on a subsequent visit, Peter “refrained from visiting the holy places in Jerusalem” even though he was just outside the city.¹⁵ As his *Vita* reads:

[T]he blessed one returned to the brethren in the plain. When he went, some were indignant in their souls and said, “How, when he abode all these days beside Jerusalem, did the blessed one not desire greatly to enter the Holy City, even if by night, and venerate the worshipful places, and especially the holy Golgotha and the life-giving tomb?”¹⁶

A monk “who was very simple and innocent” then recounts a vision in which Peter guides him through all the major sites. Together, they travel to the Martyrium of Saint Stephen and the cave with his tomb. Peter – in the vision – then “ran down to the holy Golgotha and the holy Tomb,” to the churches of Pilate and the Paralytic, Gethsemane, the holy Ascension, the house of Lazarus, Bethlehem, the tomb of Rachel, and “the rest of the temples and houses of prayer on the road,” and to Siloam, and to Zion. In the vision, they “completed a holy course and had worshipped the Lord in every place.”¹⁷ All this travel, following the standard pilgrimage route, was accomplished without *actually going* to these places, either for Peter, who found himself just outside the city, or for the “simple” monk stationed in Beth Tafsha, a few miles away.¹⁸ During the period in which the present reliquary box was made, the worshipper’s physical presence in the original landscape was decreasing in importance, just as its sites were transported throughout the Christian world in visions and in relics, among which were the so-called *benedictiones* or eulogiae (blessed objects), stored within the Sancta Sanctorum box.¹⁹ By the seventh century – after the Islamic conquest – the city of Rome, filled with the very objects that were seen as facilitating spiritual pilgrimages, had superseded Jerusalem as the primary pilgrimage destination for those farther west.²⁰ Elsner writes of a box of relics found in the crypt of the Basilica of Saint Columban, Bobbio, containing “ampullae . . . [,] earth, dust and various small objects or tokens in wood, metal and terracotta.”²¹ These objects “evoke the totality of the Holy Land,”²² an effect amplified by the arrangement of relics of place within the Sancta Sanctorum box. Once collections of relics, such as the Sancta Sanctorum box and its contents, were transported to the West, they brought Jerusalem with them.

Reminders and reminders

The mnemonic function of the box – for the original collector and later viewers familiar with its landscape of origin and the stories set therein – plays out in multifold ways. Most essentially, the gathering of eulogiae within strives to grasp what Christ left behind after the resurrection. Fragments of cloth, wood, and stones are keyed to the locations where Christ experienced his terrestrial existence: the Mount of Olives, for instance, and Bethlehem; one is marked “from Zion”; another identifies its provenance “from the life-giving [site of] Resurrection,” recalling the reference in the *Vita* of Peter to “the life-giving tomb,” and also the longing for curative effects.²³ Each eulogia, therefore, was capable of conjuring not only the specific place but also the specific narrative attached thereto.²⁴ Further, each could function as an experiential mechanism in the larger network of significations attached to the very material that was made to evoke these narratives and link them together typologically.

The bit marked “Bethlehem,” for instance, is simply a thin piece of wood, but it is rich in heuristic potential. It could have been a fragment *from* Bethlehem, a souvenir of the place where Christ was born, and the kind of material available to the pilgrim. Why not a stone, which was likely just as readily obtainable? Certainly, because it comes from the place associated with Christ’s birth, it would reference Christ’s crib, the manger originally made of wood, which was kept in the crypt of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, and mentioned by Origen ca. 247:

If anyone wishes to have further proof to convince him that Jesus was born in Bethlehem besides the prophecy of Micah and the story recorded in the Gospels by Jesus’ disciples, he may observe that, in accordance with the story in the Gospel about his birth, the cave in Bethlehem is shown where he was born and the manger in the cave where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes.²⁵

The wood from the ostensible manger – the five sycamore planks – was likely brought from Palestine to Rome in the mid-seventh century, and is preserved in Santa Maria Maggiore (Figure 9.1).²⁶ Thus, the wood splinter embedded in the reliquary box was ontologically associated with the wood of the manger, pointing to it without necessarily coming from it. These fragments – the manger as a piece of the assemblage of the barn and the splinter as a piece if not of the manger then of the place from whence it came – were related in their material, source location, and, at least in part, in their recollection of and resonance with nativity narratives.

In addition to the crib the Bethlehem eulogia recalls – we argue, purposefully – another relic associated with Christ: the cross. The cross’s many splinters, multiplied by the relic-hungry pious, circulated widely throughout “Christendom” and, when stripped of the expensive reliquaries that enshrined them and hid their irregularities, look precisely like the humble shard inserted into paste in the Syrian box (Figure 9.2).²⁷ Moreover, as one of the main *brandea* of the passion, the cross not only stood as a reminder of the event but indexed the body of Christ itself. In general, as a propagative matter, the wood was semantically and conceptually likened to flesh: it is not an accident that the Greek *ύλη* means both “wood” and “matter.”²⁸ The analogy between the cross and the body stretched on it was articulated by numerous theologians throughout the Middle Ages, anxious to explain that the worship of the cross was, in essence, like the worship of Christ himself.²⁹ In other words, the spiritual history



Figure 9.1 Giuseppe Valadier, Reliquary of the Holy Crib (*sacra culla*) (1802, Rome), Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, Rome. Photo credit: Riccardov.

of the wood inflected the meaning of the splinter visually formulated as a devotional object, so the fragment marked with “Bethlehem” would also evoke Christ’s infancy and his Passion.³⁰ It would also bear resonances of the earthly sites of these events, and the heavenly home of their protagonist. As suggested by the *Life of Desiderius of Cahors* – written shortly after his death in 655 – any relic acted as “a fragment of Paradise.”³¹ In this case, the wood fragment – as other objects in the box – would have a dual function: for a devout Christian in search of material sacredness (or sacred material), it would transport something of heaven, as other relics, but also something of the present Holy Land as well. The pilgrim gathering sacred splinters and stones and locking them away in a box would essentially enact Matthew 13:44, which compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a treasure, first hidden in the field, then unearthed, and then hidden again. This mnemonic evocation would have been echoed by the image of the Nativity painted on the lid, which figures the Christ Child not in the wooden manger but atop a stone altar and above a *fenestella* – a niche for the relic.³² This Eucharistic image models the meditation on the Nativity that merges Christ’s birth, sacrifice, and resurrection, offering an *espèce* of a visual guide for contemplation of the wood fragment.

There is no doubt that the associative net structured by the raw materials of the eulogiae would have been complicated by the relationships between and among the objects within the box.³³ Although we have no way of knowing what most of them

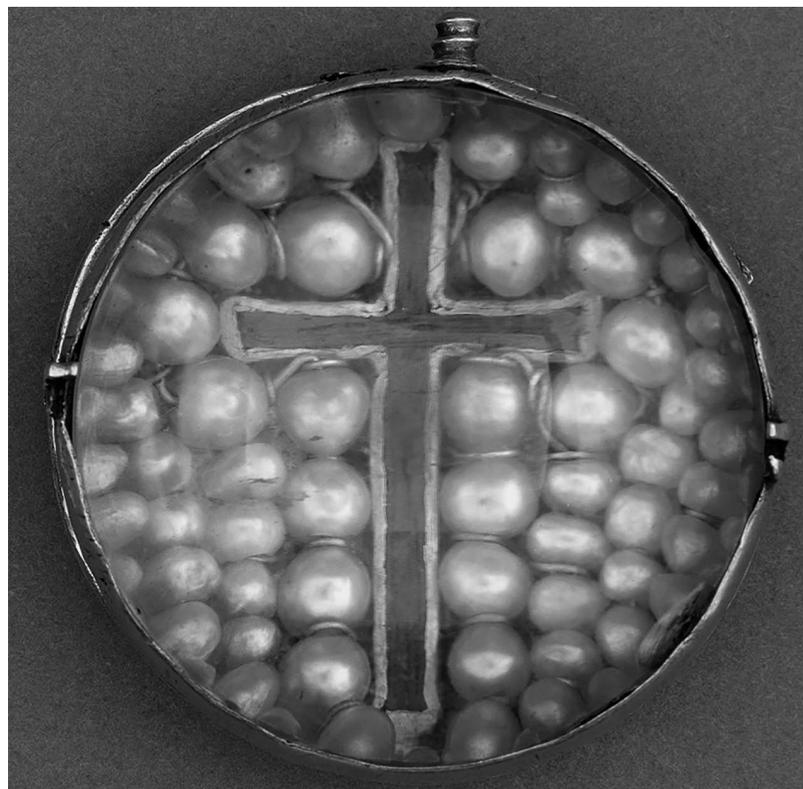


Figure 9.2 True Cross reliquary pendant (ca. 1200, Scotland), gold, wood, rock crystal, pearls, 5.5 × 5.2 × 2.8 cm, The British Museum, London. Photo credit: © Trustees of the British Museum.

index – there are very few surviving identifications – the arrangement of the objects into a loose Christogram suggests that they were meant to function not only as discrete mementos, but also as a coherent whole, mapping the topology of the Holy Land as Christ’s very *nomen sacrum*, and so his body. Derek Krueger speculates that the arrangement of the stones might not be original to the box because some are now too high for the lid to slide into place over them.³⁴ He suggests that they might have originally been placed in a bag, and in turn placed in the box. However, as Krueger notes, the paintings on the inside of the lid did not suffer the abrasions that would likely have resulted from the contents shifting around, even in a bag. Similarly, the delicate bit of wood would probably have been destroyed by being jostled by the sharp-edged rocks. It seems more likely that the arrangement is original, but that some of the stones were reset over time, as the compound dried out and some of the contents loosened. At the fulcrum of the Christogram sits a triangular stone, marked as an object from the place of the resurrection. Its form is pregnant with associations: for Plato, the triangle stands at the heart of each body and each element; for Boethius, it is the “principle and element of all forms”; and it certainly evokes the Trinity.³⁵ The material is significant

as well: it recalls a stone sepulchre in which Christ was buried and from which he arose, and it evokes the stone used to seal the tomb and then rolled away to announce the resurrection.³⁶ Placed at the center, the stone becomes a pivot on which the narratives unfolding through other eulogiae turn: its function as a visual and theological nexus, for example, activates the numerous typological parallels between the Nativity and the Resurrection and strengthens the association between Christ's life and death already inherent in the small wooden fragment marked with "Bethlehem."³⁷

The centrality of the resurrection eulogia is echoed in the prominence of its inscription: it is the only one – at least the only extant one – that describes the locus sanctus from which it comes, offering a characterization of the place it comes from as "life-giving." Others serve rather as abbreviated, practical markers with which to anchor the objects and the memories. The stress on locality is significant inasmuch as it highlights the manifold metonymic function of the eulogiae: just as their arrangement into a Christogram symbolizes and therefore embodies Jesus as the Messiah, so too, their very nature as pieces of certain locations makes them, in fact, their locations.³⁸ The importance of these locations are also evident in the four narrative images on the lid, which moor the beholder's imagination to particular, lovingly rendered places: the Nativity cave, the River Jordan, Golgotha, and Christ's sepulchre as it looked before its transformation in the subsequent century.³⁹ For viewers who had been on pilgrimage, including the original collector, this specificity would facilitate a vivid recall of the visited sites. On the other hand, the images' consistent and unifying gold backgrounds translate these worldly and perhaps personally observed locations into a heavenly realm. Even for those who had not physically traveled to the sites, they would still serve as an aid for imaginary re-enactments of the episodes from Christ's life, a devotional exercise that would aid prayer and meditation. Indeed, the inside of the lid functions as a narrative icon, particularly effective because of its very layout, familiar most immediately from ancient and medieval treatises on memory.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most germane source on medieval mnemonic theory is the so-called *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a treatise formerly attributed to Cicero, extant in more than 100 exemplars, cited by Rufinus and Grillius in the fifth century and by Priscian in the sixth.⁴¹ Book III of the treatise outlines strategies for successful construction of artificial or trained memory, which would facilitate subsequent recall of whatever information was required. The treatise suggests the construction of so-called *loci*, or backgrounds, into which *imagines*, or images, are to be inserted. Images are distinctive figures; *loci* are spaces; together, they constitute a mnemonic vehicle for heuristic recall of various events. Scholars have long recognized the value of the treatise for unpacking a wide variety of medieval images, especially those suggestive of a diagrammatic structure especially resonant with what *Ad Herennium* proposes.⁴² It suggests that *loci* be arranged in distinctive series; not be crowded; be distinct from one another; and be properly, but not too vibrantly, illuminated. The treatise acknowledges that the variety of backgrounds presupposes "a relatively large experience," although anyone can do it through the use of one's imagination: "For the imagination can embrace any region whatsoever and in it at will fashion and construct the setting of some background."⁴³ In turn, the images ought to be of the kind that "can adhere longest in the memory": that is, colorful and brilliant, at times violent, and striking in their palette and their configuration. They are magnets for the process of recollection, visually interesting, filled with memorable details. Once the *loci* are populated, they have to be "again and again run over rapidly in the mind . . . in order to refresh the images."

The inner lid of the reliquary, in other words, would make an ideal schema for such a *loci-and-imagines* construction. Set within a symmetrical grid, uniformly gilded, and enclosed in distinctive frames, Christological narratives inhabit five separate compartments, each a locus for *memoria rerum* that is configured as a summary image of a complex event. Moreover, each compartment is clearly outlined, with two grouped atop and two below the central locus – a suggestion we find in later medieval treatises on memory, such as Thomas Bradwardine’s *De Memoria Artificiali* – all interrelated through the presence of Christ and thus arranged in a well-defined series.⁴⁴ Images are uniformly eye-catching, visceral: one revels in the vivid rendition of the Sepulchre, for example, whereas another foregrounds the violence inflicted upon Christ’s body. This is not to say that the painters and users of the box referred to the treatise as a source, but, rather, that they utilized commonly understood mnemotechnic strategies, also evident in contemporary codices, such as the sixth-century Italian copy of the Gospels of Saint Augustine, which Mary Carruthers has described as “a complete set . . . of ‘*imagines rerum*’ for the events of the Passion” and posited as a near embodiment of “medieval mnemotechnic pedagogy.”⁴⁵ The eulogiae container thus becomes a quintessence of the *thesaurus*, the strongbox – a common medieval metaphor for trained memory – that contains, stores, and organizes visual and material prompts for remembering.⁴⁶

The organizing principle of this prompt is the cross. Painted on the exterior of the lid, it takes center stage on its interior with the crucifixion episode, painted twice the size of the other scenes. As the cross nearly disappears behind Christ’s body, the man on the cross becomes, in essence, the cross itself. Christ’s figure, moreover, suggests a metonymic correspondence between the cross and the format of panels on the lid: his, and the thieves’, outstretched arms emphasize the horizontal stretch of the image that functions visually as a *patibulum*, while his blue *colobium* is continued in the vertical lines that divide the top and bottom scenes, implying the *stipes*. Within, the arrangement of the objects echoes the outer image of the lid: the “X” form simultaneously presents the *chi* and evokes the crossed lance and reed, the vertical line appears both as the stem of the *rho* and the *stipes*, while a corresponding horizontal run of stones figures the *patibulum*. The lid’s interior thus serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it functions as an intermediary between the symbolic Christogram painted on the outside and another Christogram inlaid with stones within: the crucified Christ appears at the exact center of the panel, and of the box as a whole, and, when the lid is closed, his painted body is nestled between the center of the cross on the outside and the stone that marks the resurrection on the inside. Christ’s death on the cross, then, at once alludes to the dogma of the Resurrection and to a perpetual Passion. On the other hand, because the design on the outside of the lid is repeated with objects within, the lid becomes a transparency, revealing rather than concealing the contents beneath, as they, in turn, reveal the locales and the events they index through mnemonic chains of association, and through their own vibrant presence.

Imaginary worlds, material remains

This vibrancy asserts itself to this very day. The collection of eulogiae is quietly arresting. Perhaps much of its force comes from the juxtaposition of the beautiful paintings, which have frequently and justly been compared with the renowned illuminations of the Rabbula Gospels,⁴⁷ and the apparent banality of the objects they cover, celebrate, and ennoble. The fragments recall Jane Bennett’s observations about the surprisingly

attractive contents of a sewer drain (“one large men’s black plastic work glove, one dense mat of oak pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, one smooth stick of wood”). Therein, she found:

[A]n energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.⁴⁸

Bennett continues, a bit further on: “the items on the ground that day were vibratory – at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire.”⁴⁹ The contents of the reliquary are quite similar in their presence – indeed, much of what we have argued here is predicated on *medieval* ideas about the power and presence of these objects. At once vital and sacred, this gathering of meaningless detritus vibrates with yet greater presence when pulled together. In a sense, this is the operative principle of all visible relics, which look like what they are – bits of bone, locks of hair, scraps of fabric, splinters of wood – and simultaneously like things of great importance and potential.

What is created within (and through) this assemblage? In his *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark Wolf presents many strategies by which authors, artists, filmmakers, and others construct fictional worlds of various types. What occurs with all of these overlaps and imbrications is akin to his notion of diegetic braiding, “[t]he condition that occurs when multiple stories or narrative threads set in the same world share the same locations, objects, characters, and other details.”⁵⁰ Each object in the reliquary is a piece of the Holy Land, and therefore is part of a series of interlocking stories.

The members and images of this complex object (or complex of objects) construct an imaginary world by conjuring, wherever it is, the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. In so doing, it/they generate(s) an interaction with the viewers. As Wolf writes, “imaginary worlds invite audience participation in the form of speculation and fantasies.”⁵¹ In the appendix to his book, Wolf provides a list of imaginary worlds that contains many entries familiar to medievalists – the Land of the Arimaspi (from Herodotus), Thule (from Pytheas’s *On the Ocean*), “Blemmyae Land” (Pliny),⁵² and so on, but he also lists Eternal Jerusalem, citing Augustine’s *City of God*.⁵³

The world encased in the reliquary box is reminiscent of Wolf’s diegetic braiding in a second sense: for Augustine, following Psalm 87, “Jerusalem was the ‘City of our God’ of which ‘glorious things are spoken,’” and so, as Brown articulates, “Jerusalem stood for heaven, the distant home of the saved.”⁵⁴ The landscape of the present, earthly Jerusalem (and its immediate environs) was something of a stage set for the performance of visionary experiences of the City of God to come. This might also be seen as an example of an overlaid world, “[a] fictional diegesis in which an existing, Primary World location is used” – that is, the present Jerusalem – “with fictional characters and objects appearing [in] it, but without enough invention to isolate it from the Primary World into its own separate secondary world.”⁵⁵ Just as many relics were seen at once as the fragmentary remains of dead people and as active, living presences of saints in heaven, so the landscape of Jerusalem was dually resonant. The box, in turn, contains fragments of the landscape that, once removed from their points of origin and reconfigured (obscurely, loosely) into the *nomen sacrum*, the implements of the Passion, and the body of Christ, bring the earthly Jerusalem to distant Rome. As

Elsner writes, “[t]he power of relics – and in particular of *collections* of relics – lies in this special combination of tangible presence and particularity with highly generalized and suggestive evocation of a greater and more sacred past.”⁵⁶ The objects betray a longing for Jerusalem at the same time as they render its physical presence unnecessary, even obsolete. The pilgrimage and the return journey thus establish an ersatz path for the pilgrim: the objects carried from the Holy Land and eventually deposited in Rome allowed the viewer to be transported, in a sense, to the earthly Jerusalem – obviating the need for actual pilgrimage – and, from there, onward to heaven.

The objects in the box thereby not only serve to recall a past pilgrimage but also to create a present one, granting the box a role beyond its original user.⁵⁷ The vitality of the assemblage is rooted in the perceived power of the eulogiae to generate – to quote McKenzie Wark, writing about a different context – a “virtual geography, the experience of which doubles, troubles, and generally permeates [the] experience of the space” actually inhabited by the viewer.⁵⁸ Several scholars have written about “spiritual” or “imagined pilgrimage,” a process facilitated by medieval *mappaemundi*, relics, and other objects. Daniel Connolly posits Cassiodorus – who lived for a time at Constantinople – as a possible point of origin for this notion, and one that is roughly contemporaneous with the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary.⁵⁹ This sixth-century historian and founder of the Monastery of Vivarium, with its highly influential scriptorium, sought to encourage his readers to use geographical texts as a way to know the world. He noted:

[I]f a noble concern for knowledge has set you on fire, you have the work of Ptolemy, who has described all places so clearly that you judge him to have been practically a resident in all regions, and as a result you, who are located in one spot, as is seemly for monks, traverse in your minds that which the travel of others has assembled with very great labor.⁶⁰

Cassiodorus’ text echoes the dynamic we see at play in the reliquary box, likewise “assembled with very great labor.” Like the geographies of Ptolemy, the assemblage of relics and the paintings with which they are accompanied were the starting point for mental and spiritual travels. These could be rooted in memories of the actual pilgrimage during which these objects were collected or in memories of other pilgrimages taken by other travelers. So too, though, these memories could be rooted in – and borrowed from – the rich complex of biblical and exegetical texts describing the events of the Nativity, Life, and Passion of Christ, as well as other works of art, literature, and liturgy. After all, travelers to the Holy Land did not merely see what was before them, but saw – in visions, in their minds’ eyes – the long-past events that granted these otherwise ordinary places their extraordinary significance.

* * *

Encased in and contained by their box, the small *benedictiones* – much of the significance of which is rooted in their materiality, in their wood, their stone – bear witness to what Brown characterizes as “an upsurge of loyalty to holy *things*.”⁶¹ This upsurge proved to be tenacious: to this day, one may purchase a box filled with just such holy things, neatly arranged and carefully labeled, brought all the way from Jerusalem to be worshipped at home (Figure 9.3).

www.totallycatholic.com/holyland.htm

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DE LA TIERRA SANTA FROM THE HOLY LAND

The Holyland Olive wood Cross with 4 bottles contains: Holy Jordan Water, Holyland olive oil, sacred soil from the Holyland, and Holyland Incense, all safely packed in crystal-clear high grade glass bottles. The Cross and four bottles fit perfectly in a clear set that holds them for display. The bottles cap color may vary between white, red or brown. The Cross dimensions are 7x4.5x.8 cm. The dimensions of the package are: 15.5x9.3x2.5 cm. Retail Price: \$15.95 - we got a large supply so are able to offer a special clearance discount: Just \$8.95!

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Genuine Holy Land Olive Oil

Figure 9.3 JMJ Products, “Genuine Imported Gifts from The Holy Land,” *Totally Catholic* <www.totallycatholic.com/holyland.html> (accessed June 2014).

Or just, perhaps, to be put on display: the transparency of the lid in this contemporary box of relics suggests, more than anything else, constant scopic consumption. Not so in the Sancta Sanctorum container, whose engagement with sacred topography is predicated on enclosure. For here, the *benedictiones* were granted the primary view of the sites from whence they came, as depicted on the *inside* of the lid, which slides into place over them, concealing both the objects and the images from human spectatorship. That is, for the majority of their post-removal existence, these active

objects, vibrant with potential and redolent of their sacred sites of origin, have been granted a view of the lavish gold-and-polychrome images that recall their autochthonous homes. When the box is closed, we are given a view of the hybrid image uniting Christogram and crucifixion: a pair that implies the way God came to Earth, and also the route by which to follow him to the City of God. When it is open, we are greeted with a palimpsestic pair of assemblages – painted and gathered – each of which dually presents and signifies the landscape of the earthly Jerusalem of early Christian pilgrimage and the longed-for landscape of the heavenly Jerusalem at the heart of its viewers' aspirations.

Notes

- 1 Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971, repr. 1974), 52. Emphasis is original.
- 2 Brown, *Antiquity*, 182. For more on Christian pilgrimage to holy men, see Jaś Elsner and Ian Rutherford, "Introduction," in *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, eds. J. Elsner and I. Rutherford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26, and Georgia Frank, *The Memory of Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For more on the shift toward pilgrimage to holy things, see Elsner and Rutherford, *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity*, 29, and Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les origines du culte des martyrs* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1912), 60–119; Delehaye, *Sanctus: Essai sur le culte des saints dans l'antiquité* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1927), 196–207; and Delehaye, "Loca Sanctorum," *Analecta Bollandiana* 48 (1930), 5–64.
- 3 For more on groups of relics as collections, see Jaś Elsner "Replicating Palestine and Reversing the Reformation: Pilgrimage and Collecting at Bobbio, Monza and Wathingham," *Journal of the History of Collections* 9, no. 1 (1997): 117–130.
- 4 For the most recent catalog entry, see Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson, eds., *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2010), #13, 36, entry by Cristina Pantalella. See also Anton Legner, *Ornamenta Ecclesiae: Kunst und Künstler der Romanik: Katalog zur Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums in der Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle*, vol. 3 (Köln: Stadt Köln, 1985), #H8, 80, entry by Anton Legner.
- 5 *Treasures of Heaven*, 36.
- 6 Derek Krueger, "The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium," in *Treasures of Heaven*, eds. Bagnoli et al., #11, characterizes this as "a virtual pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The subject of early Christian pilgrimage is vast; we cite here three studies, all published by Oxford University Press, that offer fundamental overviews of this practice: Edward D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, AD 312–460* (1982); Peter W.L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (1990); and Joan E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (1993).
- 7 Krueger, "The Religion of Relics," 11. Pilgrimage increased again after the Crusader conquests and endured through the Renaissance, despite Islamic rule.
- 8 Elsner, "Replicating Palestine," 117.
- 9 Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Introduction," in *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 17–18.
- 10 Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*, *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 38 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 200. For a list of the great variety of pilgrimage types in the period, see Elsner and Rutherford, 28–30. Although pilgrimage to the Holy Land did continue, it was no longer the only type available.
- 11 Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, rev. ed. (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 164.
- 12 Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 200.

- 13 Cited in Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 202–203. For source text, see E. C. Amélineau, ed. and trans., *Vita Sinuthii: Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne*, vol. 1 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1888), 333ff. Shenoute was abbot of the “White Monastery,” on the outskirts of Atripe (modern-day Sohag), north of Thebes, and “the most important Coptic writer of Late Antiquity”: Pablo Alvarez, *Rediscovering Shenoute of Atripe [ca. 348–465]*, a Digital Project, University of Michigan Library [01/30/2013]. Digital facsimile: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/special-collections-library/rediscovering-shenoute-atrripe-ca-348-466-digital-project> (accessed November 2013). According to Heike Behlmer, “Visitors to Shenoute’s Monastery,” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 341, “[T]he monastery grew [under Shenoute] to be the most important religious center of the area, numbering as many as several thousand inhabitants, male and female,” with a “large monastic library.”
- 14 Cornelia B. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 247, and John Rufus, *The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem, and the Monk Romanus*, eds. and trans. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 52–53.
- 15 Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 185–186, quotation from John Rufus (?), *Vita Petri Iberi*, ed. and trans. R. Raabe (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung 1895), 98–100.
- 16 *Peter the Iberian*, 195.
- 17 *Peter the Iberian*, 196–197.
- 18 See Horn, *Asceticism*, 245–249.
- 19 See Gary Vikan, “Icons and Piety in Early Byzantium,” in *Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 572–574. For a brief discussion of topography vis-à-vis the box and its semantic relationship to the work of Robert Smithson, see Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 116–121.
- 20 Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 11ff.
- 21 Elsner “Replicating Palestine,” 119.
- 22 Elsner “Replicating Palestine,” 122.
- 23 “*ἀπὸ ζωοποιῶν Ἀναστάσεως*.” [“From the Life-Giving (place of) Resurrection.”] Transcription and translation from C. R. Morey, “The Painted Panel from the Sancta Sanctorum,” in *Festschrift zum Sechzigsten Geburtstag von Paul Clemen*, ed. Richard Klapheck (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1926), 151, who thanks Pio Franchi de’ Cavalieri for assistance therewith.
- 24 Jas Elsner, “Replicating Palestine,” 126, writes, “the collections are of ‘relics’ whose link with the origin provides a direct, metonymic evocation of the whole from which the fragments have come.”
- 25 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, i.51, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 47–48. On the nativity crib, see Kurt Weitzmann, “Loca Sancta and the Representational Arts of Palestine,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974): 31–55, 36; note to *Presepe Domini, exornatum insuper argento atque auro*, in T. Tobler, *Itinera et Descriptiones Terrae Sanctae*, 1 (Geneva: J. G. Fick, 1877), 53, par. IX. See also H. Vincent and F.-M. Abel, *Bethléem: Le Sanctuaire de la Nativité* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1914), 136.
- 26 Sible Lambertus de Blaauw, *Cultus et decor: Liturgie en architectuur in laatantiek en middeleeuws Rome: Basilica Salvatoris, Sanctae Mariae, Sancti Petri* (Delft: Eburon, 1987), 197–198.
- 27 On the veneration of the cross and cross reliquaries, see, entries 27, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 45, 46, 47, 48,, 49, 62, 77, 85, 87, 89, and 90, and Guido Cornini, “‘Non Est Toto Sanctior Orbe Locus’: Collecting Relics in Early Medieval Rome,” in *Treasures of Heaven*, eds. Bagnoli et al., esp. 71–72.
- 28 See Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1911), vol. 2, 321–322, book 19, sections 19.3–19.5 for the suggestion that “all wood is called matter” and the association between the words “matter” (*materia*) and “mother” (*mater*).
- 29 As early as the second century, Justin Martyr formulated the cross as the defining aspect of Jesus’ identity as Christ, as the son of God (see *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas

- Falls [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003], esp. 89–96); this trope, which was discussed in its many variants throughout the Middle Ages, received a definitive formulation by Thomas Aquinas, who argued that because the cross touched Christ's body and was drenched in his blood, and because it "represents to us the figure of Christ extended thereon," the cross must be "worshipped with the same adoration as Christ, viz. the adoration of *'latría.'*" And for this reason also we speak to the cross and pray to it, as to the Crucified himself." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, pt. 3, question 25, article 4, "Of the Adoration of Christ."
- 30 For the importance of materials in medieval art, see Herbert Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), ch. 20, and Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien: Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe* (Berlin: Waxmann Verlag, 1994).
 - 31 "acsi partem paradysi": *Vita Desiderii ep. Cadurcae urbis*, ed. B. Krusch, eMGH SS rer. Merov. 4, 1902, 563–602. For a brief discussion, see Brown, *Christendom*, 162.
 - 32 Weitzmann, "Loca Sancta," 36, writes: "The structure on the lid . . . is a massive cube with a niche in the center. This is the early form of the *altare fixum*, a so-called block altar, with a fenestella, a niche meant to enclose a relic, as seen in a sixth-century altar in the church of Bagnocavallo near Ravenna."
 - 33 See Bianca Kühnel, "The Holy Land as a Factor in Christian Art," in *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land, from the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms*, eds. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 463–504.
 - 34 Derek Krueger, "Liturgical Time and Holy Land Reliquaries in Early Byzantium," in *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. Holger Klein and Cynthia Hahn (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2015), 111–113.
 - 35 Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 53C–55C; Boethius, *De institutione arithemtica libri duo*, ed. Gottfried Friedlein (Leipzig: Teubner, 1867), 104; for the discussion of these sources and the exploration of the meaning of the triangle, see Rebecca Zorach, *The Passionate Triangle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), esp. ch. 1.
 - 36 Mark 15:46, Vulgate Bible, emphasis ours: "Ioseph autem mercatus sindonem, et deponens eum involvit sindone, et posuit eum in monumento, *quod erat excisum de petra*, et advolvit lapidem ad ostium monumenti"; Mark 16:3–4: "Et dicebant ad invicem: Quis revolvit nobis lapidem ab ostio monumenti? Et respicientes viderunt revolutum lapidem."
 - 37 For a detailed exploration of these many prefigurations, see Lynne Hilton Wilson, "Jesus' Atonement Foretold through His Birth," in *To Save the Lost*, eds. Richard Neitzel Holzappel, and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 103–126.
 - 38 Elsner, "Replicating Palestine," also takes up the metonymic function of relic collections.
 - 39 The outside of the lid is also evocative of place; the abstracted symbols of the Passion are planted into the hillock of Golgotha.
 - 40 On narrative icons, see Paroma Chatterjee, "Archive and Atelier: Sinai and the Case of the Narrative Icon," in *Approaching the Holy Mountain: Art and Liturgy at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai*, eds. Sharon E.J. Gerstel and Robert S. Nelson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 319–344, esp. 329–334.
 - 41 Harry Caplan, *Introduction to Rhetorica ad herennium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), xxxiv–xxxv.
 - 42 See *Ad C. Herennium: De Ratione Dicendi*, 209–225. On the importance of *Ad Herennium* for later medieval audiences, see, in addition to the work of Mary Carruthers, e.g., *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Paolo Rossi's *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*, trans. Stephen Clucas (London: Athlone, 2000), and Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1999 [1966]); art historians from Lina Bolzoni to Georges Didi-Huberman have long recognized its importance for the study of visual imagery.
 - 43 *Ad Herennium*, III, XIX.32.
 - 44 Thomas Bradwardine, *De Memoria Artificiali (On Acquiring a Trained Memory)*, trans. Mary Carruthers, in Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, Appendix C, 281–288.
 - 45 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 249.

- 46 Ibid., 33–45.
- 47 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Plut. I, 56 (586 CE). This resemblance was noted as early as 1926: Morey, “Painted Panel,” 163, who in turn cites his reliance on observations in Oskar Konstantin Wulff, *Altchristliche und byzantinische Kunst*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1914). See also Bagnoli et al., *Treasures of Heaven*, 36; and Kurt Weitzmann, “Loca Sancta,” 41.
- 48 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.
- 49 Ibid., 5.
- 50 Mark Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 367.
- 51 Ibid., 13.
- 52 Perhaps “Blemmyae Land” was not as far away from the world of late antique pilgrimage as we usually imagine. Shenoute helped shelter refugees from the historical Blemmye incursions, and then tried to convert the Blemmyes, as documented in several works by and about him: Behlmer, “Visitors to Shenoute’s Monastery,” 344–345).
- 53 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 290–291.
- 54 Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 1st ed. (Oxford: B.H. Blackwell, 1996), 52. This line is not present in the revised second edition, otherwise cited throughout.
- 55 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 379.
- 56 Elsner, “Replicating Palestine,” 126.
- 57 As Elsner, “Replicating Palestine,” 118, notes, “fragments of material from distant holy places . . . [make] the past *present* (for the believer), and in doing so [sanctify] the present with the full holy effect of the past.” Emphasis is original.
- 58 McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), vii. Wark is writing about the contemporary world and global media events, but the discussion is quite resonant with the present material. Recent studies in cognitive science suggest the creation of the so-called blended space, which brings together past and present sites and re-creates one through the use of the other: Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); for the application of the concept to medieval theater, see Jill Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York*, Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance Series (New York: Palgrave, 2010); for its potential use for art and performance historians, see Elina Gertsman, “Image and Performance: An Art Historian at the Crossroads,” in *Research on Medieval and Renaissance Drama*, 51, special issue: “Opportunities in Medieval and Renaissance Drama,” eds. Mario Longtin and Jill Stevenson (2013): 5–13.
- 59 Daniel K. Connolly, *The Maps of Matthew Paris: Medieval Journeys through Space, Time and Liturgy* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009), 28, 32. On Cassiodorus’s time in Constantinople, see Cassiodorus, *Variae*, trans. S.J.B. Barnish (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992), liii.
- 60 “tum si vos notitiae nobilis cura flammaverit, habetis Ptolomei codicem, qui sic omnia loca evidenter expressit, ut eum cunctarum regionum paene incolam fuisse iudicetis, eoque fiat ut uno loco positi, sicut monachos decet, animo percurratis quod quiquorum peregrination plurimo labore collegit.”: R.A.B. Mynors, ed., *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), 66, no. 25. Translation from Cassiodorus, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*, trans. Leslie Wever Jones (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 125 “Divine Letters,” no. 25.
- 61 Brown, *Antiquity*, 182.

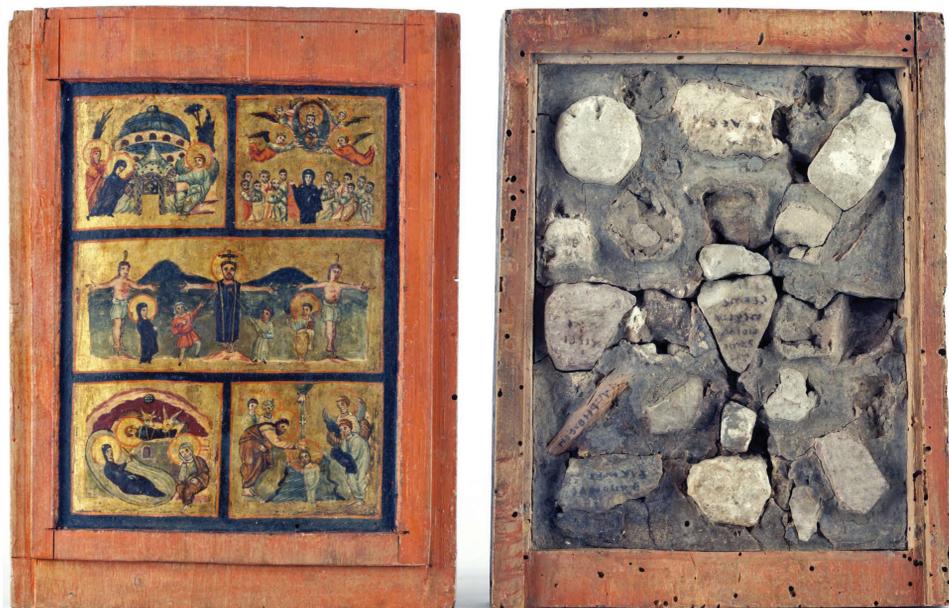


Plate 1 Reliquary box with stones and wooden fragments from the Holy Land, sixth/seventh century, from the Sancta Sanctorum treasure, Rome, Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Museo Sacro.



Plate 2 Wooden reliquary box with stones, fragments of carbon and pilgrim's tokens, Palestine, early medieval, from the Sancta Sanctorum treasure, Rome, Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Museo Sacro.



Plate 4 Obverse of lid, the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary box with stones, wood and cloth, sixth century, Syria or Palestine, painted wood, stones, wood fragments and plaster, 24 × 18.4 × 3 cm, lid 1 cm thick.